



**UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MADRID**  
**FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS**  
**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA**

**TESIS DOCTORAL**

**NEGOTIATING THE THIRD SPACE IN THE ARAB  
AMERICAN FICTION OF DIANA ABU-JABER AND  
LAILA HALABY**

**INÉS KAROUI GHOUAIEL**

**DIRIGIDA POR:**  
**DRA. DÑA. EULALIA PIÑERO GIL**

**MADRID, 2015**





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PARA LA OBTENCIÓN DEL GRADO DE DOCTOR**

**DIRIGIDA POR LA DRA. DÑA. EULALIA PIÑERO GIL  
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إلى روح جدتي الغالية ،،،  
أسفة على التأخير، كان بودي أن تشاركينا هذه الفرحة عندما كنت بيننا

إلى والديا العزيزين فوزية وعبدالرزاق ،،،  
ها أنا عند وعدي، شكرا على كل الحب والدعم



”أنا حرة... حرة تماما في عالمي هذا الصغير...”

نوال السعداوي، مذكرات طبية

*“Remember for yourself and for your tomorrow...Remember to make your day  
new and old, but be sure to think of something you never thought of before.”*

Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*

*“‘Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.’”*

Diana Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*



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## INTRODUCTION





## INTRODUCTION

Arab American literature is a burgeoning field struggling to carve a space of its own within the mosaic of America's ethnic literary scene. Its tradition dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century with the arrival of early Arab émigré writers. This literary genre has been shaped by the different phases it has gone through, together with the varied circumstances and historical events which have affected its course. Arab American literature mirrors the historical, social and political development of the American communities with Arab descent in the United States. In this way, contemporary Arab American discourse is the result of more than a century of Middle Eastern presence in America.

Aware of their cultural background, most contemporary Arab American writers focus on ethnicity and proclaim hybridity as the essence of a hyphenated Arab American identity. This increasing awareness leads them to explore the spaces situated on each side of the hyphen in their literary work, as they insist on situating the Arab American experience within its American multicultural context. These writers consider that they are entrusted with the mission of the self-representation of their community in order to do away with the widespread misrepresentations that dominate the perception of Arabs in the United States. Possessing a solid grounding in American identity, these writers express their attachment to the Arab homeland, while avoiding sentimentalism and nostalgia.

When I first started to become interested in Arab American literary production in the late 1990's, I was disappointed because of the absence of any appreciable body of scholarship approaching this emerging literature, in spite of its acquiring a growing mainstream audience. But this disappointment quickly turned into excitement at having

discovered a promising field which had hardly been studied at all in academic research in the United States and especially in Spain. Needless to say, the beginning was very hard and even painful, due to the difficulty of securing access to the limited body of criticism on Arab American fiction that did exist. I could only find a few short reviews and articles about some literary works. In spite of that, I did not hesitate to take the decision to dedicate my PhD dissertation to the exploration of the works of Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby, whom I consider two of the most important figures in the Arab American literary scene. Abu-Jaber was the first contemporary Arab American writer that I heard about when I began my search for a possible literary corpus by American writers of Arab descent. My study of her fiction is here restricted to her first two novels because the Arab American perspective is no longer central to her later work. Abu-Jaber's novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993) is commonly regarded as "the first mainstream Arab American novel",<sup>1</sup> and was thus an obvious choice to include in my thesis. Her second novel *Crescent* (2003) is a richly layered work, which reflects the writer's hybrid voice and transnational concerns.

Laila Halaby was the second major writer I discovered in the Arab American literary tradition, and my decision to include in this dissertation her novels *West of the Jordan* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) stems from my great admiration for her. I believe that these two novels can be ranked among the best contemporary Arab American works of fiction thanks to the author's poetic prose in the depiction of her characters and their stories. Both writers belong to families with mixed backgrounds, American and Jordanian with Palestinian origin, which further encouraged me to work on their narratives because of my interest in their literary depiction of Palestine, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Shalal-Esa, Andrea. "Clearing the Path for Mainstream Arab American Literature." *Al Jadid Magazine*, Vol. 16, N°62 (2010).  
< <http://www.aljadid.com/content/clearing-path-mainstream-arab-american-literature>>

question of displacement and exile. I think that Abu-Jaber and Halaby are especially prominent names in a generation of Arab American writers who have succeeded in presenting the stories of their hyphenated characters to mainstream America. Their narrative questions the widespread misrepresentations of Arabs in American popular culture, as well as the preconceived notions of what constitutes Arab American subjectivity. They present, instead, their own perception of individual and collective Arab American identities. They thus portray a diverse collection of characters and stories, which together provide a perfect stage for the negotiation of Arab American subjectivity in the United States.

For this reason, I have made use of Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space as the theoretical framework for this research. I believe that this choice distinguishes my approach from other studies in the field. As far as I know, Bhabha's theory has not been used as a theoretical starting point to approach the selected novels for this study, or Arab American literature in general. Trying to find a space of its own within the context of multiethnic America, Arab American literature has been studied according to many theoretical concepts as is the case of the rest of minority literatures. I consider that the Third Space theory is especially relevant to dealing with the novels by Abu-Jaber and Halaby because they express the very idea of the in-between space, which allows hybrid individuals to create a place where they can articulate their cultural difference. The writers perfectly illustrate the elaboration of negotiated strategies of selfhood for the construction of individual and communal identities. In this light, the use of Bhabha's theory in this thesis is intended to portray the novels' deconstruction of essentialized frameworks of identity through the creation of an anti-essentialist Arab American subjectivity, which is unstable, complex, multilayered and deeply rooted in the Arab American experience.

As exemplified in the different chapters of this dissertation, the complexity of the Arab American experience is mirrored in the literary production of the members of the community. Instead of being labeled exclusively either Arab or American, Arab American literature occupies an in-between space between both worlds. It is a hybrid genre standing right at the hyphen as it borrows from both literary traditions in order to shape its own perspective. It displays thematic links and similarities with multiethnic literatures in the United States. Therefore, while this project intends to delineate the transnational connections of this literature to the Arab world, it also aims to contribute to the efforts to carve out a space for Arab American literature in the U. S. literary canon. Despite the emergence of an important body of Arab American literature in the last two decades, there is still, as I have said, a shortage of extensive critical material with which to establish theoretical and methodological approaches for the study of this growing field. Hence, my dissertation hopes to be a small contribution to the lack of literary criticism of this genre, and thus help to fill this critical gap. It also intends to take part in the discussions addressing the issues related to current Arab American concerns, developing, in this way, my own approach in this field

In this project, my intention is to analyze some of the major themes and issues addressed by most contemporary Arab American writers, including, of course, Abu-Jaber and Halaby, and thus provide an addition to the attempts to situate Arab American literature within the broader spectrum of American letters. Moreover, I highlight the links that writers with an Arab background are extending to other minority groups such as Asian Americans, African Americans and Latinos, among others. In this way, this dissertation aims to shed light on how these writers transcend ethnic boundaries through the creation of a minority discourse providing a space for interethnic communalism. The novels selected for this study portray the heterogeneous nature of the Arab American

selfhood, emphasized by the complexity and diversity of national origins, religions, dialects, and also personal experiences. At the same time, they insist on its Americanness.

The first chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to the study of the Arab American literary tradition starting from the beginning of the twentieth-century to the present. I consider that it is an important contribution to this field of studies, as it traces the history of Arab immigration to the United States and explores the different phases of the Arab presence in that country. In my analysis of each historical phase, I try to depict the literature of the time produced by the members of the community. The development of this literary tradition mirrors the patterns of Arab American history and the changing contexts that pushed the community's writers into creating new spaces to make their voices heard. This chapter is aimed to stand as a historical and literary framework for the whole dissertation. I start with early Arab immigrants from Greater Syria, who began to reach the American shores by the end of the nineteenth century. I analyze the journey of the Arab peddlers who managed to set up their own family businesses and ended up being assimilated into the American middle-class society and embracing its standards, while they simultaneously struggled for white racial status. This period witnessed the emergence of the *émigré* writers who wrote in Arabic and English and mostly belonged to the Mahjar literary movement such as Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), Ameen Rihani (1876-1931), and Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988), who formed the New York Pen League in 1920. Heirs of two cultural and literary traditions, they yearned to play the role of cultural intermediary as they sought not only to create philosophical meeting points between East and West, but also to fuse them together. The obsession of the Arab American literature of the time to prove itself worthy in the American context can be perceived in the autobiographies published then, like Abraham Rihbany's, for

instance, which used Christian identity to distance Syrians from Islam, and therefore to highlight their affinity with the West.

The second generation of Arab American writers came of age in a period when the community had been going through decades of assimilation, and after the rupture of communications with the homeland because of U.S. policies limiting the number of immigrants until 1965. Consequently, the children of the first generation Syrian immigrants did not speak Arabic and had a diminished awareness of their Arab heritage. The works of writers like William Blatty and Vance Bourjaily embody the culmination of the assimilative process, showing a deep ambivalence toward Arab ethnicity and establishing a distance from their Arab identity.

The second and third waves of Arab immigration to the United States, respectively from 1945 to 1967 and from 1967 to the present, changed the composition of the Arab American presence in America, as they included large numbers of highly educated professionals as well as students at American universities from different parts of the Arab world. These immigrants proved to be less likely to assimilate because they comprised highly politicized individuals with strong Arab national identities, which helped raise an ethnic consciousness among the Americanized generations. This emerging consciousness was accelerated by the events taking place in the Arab homeland at that time, especially the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The newer and older Arab American communities realized the necessity of coming together, united by their opposition to the Zionist project in the region, and by their disappointment at the U. S. official support of Israel at the expense of the indigenous Arab population of Palestine. The consequent increasing hostility and anti-Arab bias in American media, marking the beginning of the marginalization of the group, led the members of these communities to start identifying themselves as “Arab.” The rise of this consciousness was paralleled by

the surfacing of an important body of Arab American literature oriented rather towards poetry, and waving between the ethnic discourse and themes independent of ethnic perspectives. This literary production contributed to setting the stage for a full-blown flourishing of Arab American literature during the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The third phase of the Arab American literary tradition has witnessed a significant shift towards prose writing, accompanied by an engagement with ethnicity and the racialization of the Arab American experience. A new generation of Arab American writers has been publishing a growing literary body, more sophisticated in scope and wider in content, aiming to reinforce their tradition in its American context. Contemporary Arab American writers are aware of the vulnerability of their community, especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks, which strongly reinforced the negative stereotypes against Arab Americans, concealing their complexity and diversity. In a time when even the idea of their belonging to the country is being questioned, these writers seek to reflect their community's quest to regain its own voice and achieve self-representation in order to defend their interests as American citizens and also to defend their Arab heritage.

Chapter two is aimed at providing a theoretical framework for this dissertation, in which I try to define Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, as developed in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), in order to redefine it afterwards in terms of the Arab American discourse. Starting from the idea of hybridity as a mixed location where individuals do not belong to any unified or stable position, making their subjectivity multiple and unstable, the scholar challenges ethnocentric notions of selfhood and identity. He argues that identity, individually or en masse, is never pre-given because it must be enunciated. In this respect, he coins the term the Third Space for the concept

which “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation” (1994: 55). These discursive conditions of enunciation ensure “that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew” (55). Therefore, the Third Space gives hybrid subjects the opportunity to maintain a process of translation and negotiation through the creation of a space where they can articulate and negotiate their cultural difference.

Contemporary Arab American literature embodies to a large extent this idea as it presents an in-between space approaching the past and cultural origins in order to establish a constant dialogue and negotiation. In this part, I try to trace the articulation of hybridity in the works of some contemporary American writers and poets with Arab origins, such as Lawrence Joseph, Suheir Hammad, Randa Jarrar and Rabiha Alameddine. I then dedicate the final part of this chapter to a thorough biographical introduction to Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby, where I explore links between their own personal itineraries, as hybrid individuals, and their creative writings which provide a relevant site for the negotiation of the Third Space.

The third chapter examines *Arabian Jazz* (1993) by Diana Abu-Jaber and *West of the Jordan* (2003) by Laila Halaby in two separate sections. This chapter is meant to analyze the writers’ approach to the construction of female Arab American identities, through the study of the identification options offered to their female characters. Situating her novel in a poor white neighborhood in upstate New York, Abu-Jaber traces the development of the identification process of two Jordanian American sisters, Jemorah and Melvina. I will examine the sisters’ journey within an alienating frame which problematizes their difficulties of maladjustment and double identity. The early experience of loss of the mother figure is another important element contributing to the complexity of the girls’ situation, because it has not only engendered the displacement



of their imaginary, but also their being rejected by the American half of the family. The presence of the Jordanian part of the family is also analyzed under the scope of what I consider Abu-Jaber's attempt to de-mythologize the homeland, mainly through the character of Aunt Fatima, who struggles to reproduce the oppressive models of her idealized ethnic past through her nieces. In addition, I shed light on the novel's depiction of a hybridized version of Arab American masculinity through the father figure of Matussem, who makes of jazz a sort of soundtrack for his ongoing process of negotiation as a man and as a father. In the middle of all of this, Melvina, the full-time nurse, and Jemorah, the dreamer, are required to sort out their complex process of identity construction.

The second section of this chapter is devoted to the analysis of Halaby's *West of the Jordan*, which presents the narratives of displacement of four teenage cousins with Palestinian origin in a cycle of voices. Each chapter they narrate is the site where they expose their identities-in-the-making, whether as Arab or Arab American women, taking into account the multiplicity of their personal, cultural and economic conditions and circumstances. This part will trace the different negotiation processes followed by the teenagers during their journey of self-identification in America and also in Palestine. Mawal's experience is the first to be depicted, as she is the only cousin who has remained in Palestine. The three others, Soraya, Khadija and Hala, have to negotiate the patterns of their hyphenated subjectivity in their American context. In this way, this section examines the unheard stories told by Halaby in order to shed light on the heterogeneity of the experiences of Palestinian and Palestinian American women.

Chapter four, dedicated to the study of Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, offers a close analysis of the suggested creative strategies of resistance to the mainstream portrayal of Arabs in the United States. Focusing on the novelist's commitment to this

issue of the image of Arabs, new strategies of representations are analyzed. This chapter examines Abu-Jaber's deconstruction of the generalized terrorist label associated with Arab individuals. She depicts instead the image of Arab urbane intellectuals and scholars, which is not very present in the American imagination, accompanied by a wide range of references to Middle Eastern culture, especially literature and music. The writer also provides an interesting image of a humanized Iraq, highlighting its historical and cultural heritage. Afterwards, I probe the in-between spaces provided by the novel where the hybrid characters articulate their selfhood and search for strategies of negotiation. The Arab restaurant functions not only as a space where home is re-created on the ethnic borderland, but also as a territory of cultural negotiations, mapping the complexities of the ethnic components of American society. In this same line, I investigate the novel's portrayal of food as a human connector bridging differences within and between ethnic communities.

The last chapter of this dissertation studies Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), which is one of the first Arab American fictional works to address the September 11 terrorist attacks and their direct consequences on the lives of many Arabs and Arab American people in the United States. The novelist focuses on the aftermath of these events through her depiction of the notion of the American dream from an Arab American perspective in an age of an accelerated racialization and a discriminatory profiling of people with a Middle Eastern background. The chapter examines the pursuit of this dream through the experience of an Arab American couple, who have chosen to embrace America's consumerist culture and enjoy their seemingly bright prospects in the American Promised Land at the expense of their Arab traditions. I go on to trace the steps in the downfall of each one of them after their lives are impinged on by the terrorist attacks, provoking their alienation not only from one another but also from the

American lifestyle they have adopted for years. Halaby portrays the displacement suffered by the couple in a country which starts to question their very sense of belonging to the American community, leading to the collapse of their marriage, and converting their American dream into a nightmare.

This dissertation, therefore, studies contemporary Arab American writers' deconstruction of essentialized frameworks of their community's subjectivity and the negotiation of an Arab American Third Space within the context of multiethnic America. The novels I have selected are those which I think best illustrate the course of contemporary Arab American narrative. They provide a stage for their hyphenated characters to explore their marginality and otherness, and to reinforce their diverse and heterogeneous experiences in their American context. They bring into focus the crucial role played by Arab American literature in consolidating the community through the attempts to illustrate and record the divergent and multitudinous concerns of its members. My hope is that this dissertation reflects and demonstrates these concerns, and thus contributes to fill the critical gap in the field.



## **CHAPTER 1**



# **CHAPTER I**

## **THE ARAB AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

Although Arab American literary tradition dates back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has only recently shown signs of coming into its own, and therefore hoping to be recognized as part of the US ethnic literary landscape. The last two decades have witnessed the emergence of new writers and voices, to the delight of Arab American scholars who, according to Evelyn Shakir, “have been waiting a long time for poems and stories that make myth of (and so make real) our experience and that of our immigrant ancestors” (1996: 3). The development of Arab American literature mirrors the patterns of Arab American history, and the changing contexts that pushed the community's writers into creating new spaces to make their voices heard. In this chapter, I will try to trace the three distinct phases of Arab American literature.

### **1.1 Early Arab American literature**

The story of Arab American literature started with the first wave of Arab immigrants who reached the American shores as early as the 1880's, when an emigration wave started from the Ottoman-ruled region of “Greater Syria”, including Mount Lebanon and the surrounding provinces of Syria and Palestine, toward the New World. Probably the first Arabs to discover the economic opportunities in the United States were the Christian tradesmen who participated in the Philadelphia International Exposition in 1876, encouraged by the Ottoman Sultan to exhibit Syrian wares. Their successful trip and enthusiastic reports helped stimulate a widespread migratory

movement all over the country. Most of these early immigrants were mountain-village Christians escaping military service – imposed by the Turkish government on Christian as well as Muslim subjects – and evidently seeking economic opportunities. Only a few thousand young Muslims took part in this emigration adventure, discouraged by the fear of being unable to maintain their Islamic traditions in a Christian society. For the first several years, these immigrants were identified as Turks as they were subjects of the Ottoman Empire. These immigrants despised their Ottoman overseers, however, and preferred to identify themselves as Syrian. Many young Syrians found their way to the New World, and soon they were followed by married men and families. With few exceptions, they considered themselves “sojourners” whose objective was to make money and then go back home “to enjoy the status and privileges that money would bring.” Indeed, “emigration was generally a family venture and was financed by family resources. It was considered an investment whose return would be both wealth and prestige when the emigrant returned to his native village” (Naff 1983: 14).

Unskilled and often illiterate, many of these early Christian Arab immigrants engaged in peddling for two or three years before returning home with a financial stake large enough to permit them to buy more land in their ancestral villages or to set up their own shops. Entire family groups went to America to work side by side, as peddling required little English or capital, and it was organized by fellow Arabs who operated as suppliers, extended credits and showed newcomers the routes. “Peddling drew young men and women from villages in groups of up to sixty or more, allowing the network of transit services to be formed and stimulating a Syrian industry of manufacturers, importers, and wholesalers to supply their needs” (Naff 1983: 16). These early arrivals established a model for the residence and assimilation of later Arab immigrants. The later arrivals settled along the Arab peddlers’ routes, establishing trading networks in



the cities and small towns across the United States. Peddling was a lifestyle which, in addition to accumulating capital, accelerated assimilation because it provided ample opportunities to learn English and mix with the local populace, and therefore helped the Arab immigrants acquire new values and enthusiastically embrace American standards, and even develop the idea of settling permanently in the United States. This acquired sense of permanence led Syrians to settle down later in widely dispersed communities across the country, where many opened family businesses and retail shops. Peddling could – and often did – lead to economic prosperity. Backpacks gave way to trucks, later a small dry goods store, then to a department store and, perhaps, a chain of stores. As Naff states, “given the economic opportunities and the system of values in the United States, Syrians became success-oriented free-enterprisers” (1983: 15).

Alix Naff sustains that early Arab immigrants identified themselves with “religiously self-segregated neighborhoods and quarters in villages, towns and cities of the old country” (1985: 63). This “village mindedness” encouraged factionalism within the ranks of the immigrant community, a situation that prevented it from establishing a solid identity, and ultimately hampered its development into a single ethnic group. However, fragmentation gave rise to a multitude of publications, each championing the causes, interests and ideological leanings of some segment of the community. The sojourners, therefore, developed a diasporan consciousness reflected in their newspapers which were highly sectarian and political, and oriented towards events in the Middle East. Competition between these often short-lived papers was keen. *Kawkab Amirka* (The Star of America) was the first Arabic-language newspaper established in North America, and which came into existence in New York in 1892. The paper “did not espouse a religious bias” and remained loyal to the Ottoman Empire, perhaps because of the [founder’s] family’s Damascene origin and Eastern Orthodox Christian faith” (Naff

1983: 7). Naoum Mokarzal founded in 1898 a newspaper called *Al-Hoda* (Guidance), in order to oppose the policy of the publishers of *Kawkab Amirka*, and “to serve the cause of a Christian, Maronite-dominated Lebanese nation under French tutelage, independent of the Ottoman Empire (Naff 1983: 7). *Mir’at al-Gharb* (Mirror of the West) was founded in 1899 and voiced the Syrian Orthodox and anti-Ottoman Arabism. The Druze founded *Al Bayan* (The News) in 1910. These papers did not discourage the community’s sectarian division, each claiming to be the best representative of its sect in this “temporary” residence. On the other hand, these ethnic newspapers encouraged assimilation and good citizenship of Arab immigrants in the US.

While peddling had a key role in the development of a sense of permanence among early Arab immigrants, World War I, according to Michael Suleiman, was a turning point in the history of the Arab American community. The “people who were in but not part of American society” (1999: 4), became increasingly cut off from events in their homelands, and the whole community had to fall back on its own resources. Only after World War I did “the Arabs in the United States become truly an Arab American community” (Sulaiman 1994: 43). They realized they were unlikely to ever return back to their homelands, which forced them to address crucial questions about their identity as Arab Americans, and their relationship with America. This awareness speeded up the assimilation process and led to decreased sectarian conflicts, and also increased calls for unity, and more participation in the American political process. During World War I, many enlisted in the American army or joined war efforts, such as buying liberty bonds. The experience enhanced the community’s sense of patriotism and made them feel they were now part of American society. They started “to imitate their neighbors and to seek their approval. They became citizens, bought homes, and followed the middle-class

course out of old neighborhoods into better ones and ultimately into the suburbs.” (Naff 1983: 18)

The Americanization process was complicated by the racial definitions of American identity which threatened to exclude Arabs who sought assimilation in the US by claiming their right to be categorized as white citizens. The Naturalization Act of 1790 had granted the right of citizenship to what it termed “free white persons.” However, the definition of white became the subject of intense debate. Naff states that by 1899 the Bureau of Immigration had begun “to distinguish Syrians and Palestinians by ‘race’ from other Turkish subjects, considering them Caucasian” (1985: 109). But after 1906, immigrants from western Asia, including Arabs, became caught up in new naturalization laws basing eligibility for citizenship on non-Asiatic identity. In a series of court cases called “prerequisite cases”, Lisa Suhair Majaj notes, “petitions for naturalization were challenged and in some instances denied on the basis of whether or not petitioners qualified as ‘white.’ These cases not only decided the fate of individual immigrants, but also set precedents for the inclusion or exclusion of entire ethnic groups” (2000: 321). In the cases involving Arabs, it was argued that Arabs should be denied the right for citizenship based on their dark skin color, their origin in the Asian continent, distance from European culture, and proximity to Islam. However, most cases before 1920 were resolved in favor of the applicants, which led scholars like Alixa Naff to consider prerequisite cases as an anomalous period in a relatively straightforward Arab American history of assimilation.

When Arabic-speaking immigrants were faced with the threat of losing citizenship rights, they battled for white racial status within the context of white supremacy. In courts and in the media they tried hard to assert their “whiteness,” emphasizing their Christian faith and their origin in the Holy Land. “The Syrian,” then,

was not “Asiatic” or “negro” but “a civilized white man who has excellent traditions and a glorious historical background and should be treated as among the best elements of the American nation” (42),<sup>2</sup> as argued in a letter published in the Syrian immigrant newspaper *Al-Shaab* in a telling response to the lynching of a Syrian man and his wife after a car accident in Florida, in 1929. This racist statement reveals the Syrians’ fears of being exposed and their whiteness contested. While trying to demonstrate that the Syrian was “not a negro,” the article “appeared unconcerned that black persons were regularly the victims of extralegal violence” (Gualtieri, 165). On the contrary, it reveals the Arab-speaking immigrants’ efforts to distance themselves from a racialized Other embodied in African Americans, and “anxieties about their own racial identification in a context where to be non-white had serious consequences” (Majaj 2000: 325).

Like other immigrant groups, such as the Irish and Italians, in their quest for acceptance in the American context, Syrians “grasped for the whiteness at the margins of their experience” (Roediger, 190). They did not try to “challenge the *premise* that whiteness was a legitimate prerequisite for social, economic, and political privilege” (Gualtieri, 165). Even when they were the victims of racial violence and discrimination in the period of Jim Crow, the community leaders tended to emphasize racist discourse and to avoid challenging the prevailing views held by native whites. Their strategy was to not risk losing the security of their whiteness and, therefore, to reinforce their position on the white side of the color line. This ambiguous racial status of early Arab immigrants was resolved by affirming their whiteness, which demonstrates that whiteness is not a biological fact, but rather a historically constructed and contested category (Ignatiev, 2). One of the legacies of Syrians was the Congress’s decision to officially recognize Arab immigrants as “white” in 1917, and place them within the path

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<sup>2</sup> “Has the Syrian Become a Negro.” *Al Shaab*, New York, May 1929. Reprinted in *Syrian World* III, 12 (June 1929): 42.

of whiteness and American citizenship. This status was strengthened by the 1920 census, which identified Palestinians and Syrians, separately, under the category of “Foreign-born white population” (Naff 1985: 117).

As Sarah Gualtieri notes, “a common pattern among Syrians was to reaffirm and invest in their whiteness” (165). Just as in court cases, newspapers and social relations, they did so in letters as well. Majaj argues that “the links between western, European, Christian identity, ‘whiteness’ and American identity, and between non-European, non-Christian identity, non-whiteness and non-American identity persisted, shaping Arab American experience and literature both directly and indirectly.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, early Arab American writers were conscious of their mission to serve as a bridge between East and West. These émigré writers, who wrote in Arabic as well as in English, mostly belonged to the Mahjar (Arabic for “place of immigration”) literary movement that incorporated diasporic writers in North and South America during the early part of the twentieth century. While the South American branch of this group was centered in Brazil, its northern counterpart settled in New York and revolved around the vigorous personality of Gibran Kahlil Gibran. The other major figures of the northern branch were Mikhail Naimy, Ameen Rihani and Elia Abu Madi. Unlike the southern group, which was conservative and hardly challenged the prevailing neo-classical tradition of Arab poetry, New York writers showed no reverence for traditional Arab culture, and therefore, for Arab literary norms (Jayyusi 1977: 70). Their US-based haven provided them with ideals of liberty and progress, which helped free them from the conservative constraints of their Arab homelands subjected to Ottoman oppression.

Under the influence of western Romanticism and American transcendentalism, the New York school inaugurated a new age of Romantic literature in the Arab World

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<sup>3</sup> Majaj, Lisa Suhair. “Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments.” *American Studies journal*. Number 52. 2008. 29 June 2009.  
<<http://www.asjournal.org/archive/52/150.html>>

(Badawi 1975: 203). Journalism played an important part in promoting this group of writers, not only through introducing their poetry and prose to their fellow immigrants, but also through attracting the literary elite of the Middle East. The ambitious literary journal *Al-Funun* (The Arts), edited by Naseeb Arida from 1913 to 1918, and the newspaper *Al-Sayeh* (The Traveler), established by Abdul Massih Hadad and running from 1912 to 1957, served as a mouthpiece for their remarkably cohesive philosophy of literature and life. The movement culminated with the formation of *Al Rabita al Qalamiyya*, known as the New York Pen League, in 1920.

According to poet and novelist Mikhail Naimy, the group's main theoretician, the purpose of this revolutionary society was "to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation, and to infuse a new life into its veins so as to make of it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations" (154). The group was committed to confronting the restrictive rules and rigid regulations of early twentieth-century Arab literature, which was limited to the imitation of classical Arab letters. The movement, self-consciously dedicated to literary reform, believed in the necessity of updating literature to the needs, interests and expectations of early twentieth-century readers, as they were convinced that stagnation and imitation would lead to the death of literature itself if no efforts were made to revive the spirit of Arab literature of the time. These young writers, then, generated to a large extent the revival of literature in their Arab homelands, and to the setting of the bases of modern Arab literature.

Al Mahjar writers' great impact on Arab letters, together with their nationalistic goals, did not prevent them from shaping their own literary, intellectual and political project in the US. Heir of two cultural and literary traditions, they yearned to play the role of cultural intermediary as they sought not only to create philosophical meeting points between East and West, but also to fuse them together. The fact of writing in

Arabic and English signified a constant literary and cultural translation, a process that sometimes tended to collide with Orientalist discourses.

Writers like Gibran and Rihani were aware that addressing an American audience did not just imply the ability to write in English – a foreign language – but, most importantly perhaps, the necessity of placing themselves in relation to a powerful discourse that had already shaped their readers' conception of oriental culture. Writing in English meant that the emerging Anglophone Arab literature was restricted to the already established discourse, and then constantly had to define itself in relation to it. Nevertheless, when they wrote within an Arabic cultural discourse, they

not only had a different agenda, but also enjoyed greater discursive latitude in that, first, they did not have to explain Arab culture to Arabic readers; secondly, they were not expected by their readers to pose as Oriental spokesmen; and thirdly, they did not have to abide by discursive strictures imposed on their cultures by a conquering knowledge system – with its stereotypes, typologies, culturalist and racist frames of reference, privileged texts and modes, and so forth – even when they could not free themselves entirely from its powerful imprint. (Hassan 2007: 249)

Addressing an Arab audience allowed them to challenge essentialist and simplistic dominant Orientalist discourses, and therefore, to reveal and even confront their imperialistic motives and foundations. On the other hand, when they wrote in English they had to convey their message in a way that would not affect their level of acceptance as writers among American readers. As Shakir states,

The first generation of Arab American writers (as might be expected of immigrants of an age of rampant xenophobia) dressed carefully for their encounter with the American public, putting on the guise of prophet, preacher, or man of letters. They could not hide their foreignness, but they could make it respectable (1996: 6).

In their struggle to demonstrate themselves worthy in the American context, early Arab American writers focused on the fact of being Orientals and at the same

time, able to produce literature and be compared with the most illustrious Western writers. In their attempts to bridge worlds and redefine the relationship between East and West, they tried to carefully challenge the stereotypes part of the Orientalist system of the time. Edward Said argues that the Orientalist plays the role of a translator.

The relationship between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization or cultural monument, the Orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object. Yet the Orientalist remained outside the Orient, which however much was made to appear intelligible, remained beyond the occident (1978: 222).

In this context, early Arab American writers claimed the role of Orientalist translator out of their belief that they were more prepared and more appropriate to interpret the Orient than European Orientalists. In spite of being immersed in the systematic Orientalist discourse, they felt a kind of tension between their own experiences and that knowledge. Hassan notes that their “attempts to replace the Orientalists as interpreters or translators of the Orient were a way of claiming cultural space and voice, countering the negativity associated with the Orient, and mediating between it and the West for the sake of greater cross-cultural understanding” (250).

These writers accepted the Orientalist essentialist differentiation between East and West as two contrasting entities. However, they did not believe at all in the West’s superiority over the East, as they tried to redefine the relationship between the two poles by challenging any kind of hierarchical classification of their values. They provided an alternative to the dominant Orientalist discourse, consisting of a duality between two equal partners complementing each other and seeking a metaphysical equilibrium. As Hassan notes, many of these writers, like Rihani for instance, “envisioned a Hegelian dynamic that would eventually blend East and West into a higher civilizational synthesis, and saw themselves in the role of two-way reformers and facilitators of that



process” (252). Hassan goes on to explain that this vision admitted, on the one hand, the Orientalist distinction between East and West, and on the other, it “rejected its historical immutability in favor of a conception of East and West as values and attitudes of mind that are not geographically determined and which can, therefore, circulate among cultures over long historical periods” (252). This method would allow them to transmit, as a matter of fact, an important feeling of pride in their homelands’ cultural and civilizational heritage, something they could contribute to their new country.

It is true that early Arab American writers were very concerned with, and critical of, the worsening situation back home, as they constantly expressed, for instance, their nationalistic aspirations and their support of Arab unity and independence from the Ottomans, and later from European colonialism. Moreover, they advocated the reform of social conditions in the Arab homelands, and strongly condemned religious superstition and the power of the clergy. In fact, both Rihany and Gibran, with a Maronite Catholic background, were excommunicated in 1903 and 1908 respectively. Nevertheless, they expressed their pride in their Arab cultural legacy as well. In his message entitled “To Young Americans of Syrian Origins,” written especially for the first issue of the Arab American magazine *The Syrian World* published in 1926, Gibran addressed his Arab American compatriots:

I believe in you, and I believe in your destiny.  
I believe that you are contributors to this new civilization.  
I believe that you have inherited from your forefathers an ancient dream,  
a song, a prophecy, which you can proudly lay as a gift of gratitude upon  
the lap of America.  
I believe you can say to the founders of this great nation, “Here I am, a  
youth, a young tree, whose roots were plucked from the hills of Lebanon,  
yet I am deeply rooted here, and I would be fruitful.”  
... And I believe that you can say to Abraham Lincoln, the blessed,  
“Jesus of Nazareth touched your lips when you spoke, and guided your  
hand when you wrote; and I shall uphold all that you have written.”  
I believe that you can say to Emerson and Whitman and James, “In my  
veins runs the blood of the poets and wise men of old, and it is my desire  
to come to you and receive, but I shall not come with empty hands.”

... It is to stand before the towers of New York, Washington, Chicago and San Francisco saying in your heart, "I am the descendent of a people that built Damascus, and Byblus, Tyre and Sidon, and Antioch, and now I am here to build with you, and with a will." (4-5)

This address captures the spirit of the period as it was oriented towards the first generation of Syrian Americans whose first language was English. While Gibran advocated the Americanness of Syrian Americans, and therefore their duty to serve that country, he reminded them of the glorious history of their ancestors' homelands and the obligation to be proud of their roots and ancient civilizations. The tree imagery used by Gibran introduces to the mind of the reader concepts like fertility, strength and hard work of a settled community as proud of its origins as of its adopted home. According to Gibran, Arab Americans then are supposed to go on with the work started by the Founding Fathers of the American nation and contribute to the building of their country. He tried to convey the idea that while their ancestors had built the ancient cities that gloriously marked the civilizations of the Old World, Arab Americans had to take part in the building of the civilization of the New World. Gibran here emphasized that Arab Americans had much to offer to the American nation as a whole, and therefore he validated the East as a source of inspiration from which the Western world could learn a lot. Basing his address upon the concept of equality and reciprocity between East and West, Gibran made reference to some of the most distinguished American writers in order to suggest the literary potential of Arab American intellectuals, and their being heir of an important literary tradition, and to predict the contribution they could make to the US literary canon. He articulated his belief in the qualities and abilities of the Syrian American and constantly reminded him of his Arab background and heritage.

Gibran's address embodies what Hassan considers a "reconstructed Orientalism" which provided an alternative to the dominant discourse and which was obviously

articulated in the works of early Arab American writers, particularly in Rihani's writings. In his address entitled "When East and West Meet," which appeared in the same magazine in June 1927, and which was delivered two months earlier at the American University of Beirut, Rihani provides a direct answer to Rudyard Kipling's proposition explicitly articulated in his poem entitled "The Ballad of East and West" (1889), where he says:

"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's Great Judgment Seat."<sup>4</sup>

Rihani considers that the title of his address "implies a partial denial of the dictum of Rudyard Kipling, megaphoned to the world" through the cited verse. He says:

I admit at the start, that from the surface point of view, the evidence is in favor of Mr. Kipling. The East prays, the West dances; the East dreams, the West thinks; the East broods, the West plays... The Oriental is imaginative and metaphoric, the Occidental is literal and "matter-of-fact." Kipling's dictum is in this, at least, wholly to the point. (8)

Rihani here seems to accept the Orientalist distinction between East and West, as he utilizes the prevailing discourse's essentialized concepts. He does not challenge what this discourse considers as the opposing essences of two different poles. Indeed, he confirms the supposed antithetical nature of these two autonomous entities. However, he considers that the traits of both sides need to be nuanced, and historicized:

Like all generalities, however, these traits are not without exception. They are characteristic, but not exclusive. Take, for instance, the fawning and florid Oriental, extravagant with the metaphor and the puff, he is not a type exclusive. He is a species produced by despotism and its pompous court. The aristocracy kowtows the Emperor; the lower classes kowtow to the aristocracy and to each other...

When absolute monarchies were the rule in Europe, the Europeans, on the whole, were quite Oriental in the art of fawning and adulation; while the extravagant manner, as much in evidence in the nation as around the throne, was revealed, not only in speech, but also in the dress of the period. Consider the ruffles and feathers of my lords at court; the

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<sup>4</sup> Kipling, Rudyard. "The Ballad of East and West," *MacMillan's Magazine*. December 1889.

flounces and trains of my lady in waiting; consider the dedications penned by needy scribes to their rich patrons... As for the people, they follow, according to the Arabic proverb, their sovereign. (8 – 9)

Rihani's words are highly significant as he denies the exclusivity and timelessness of the East and West's traits, which he links to historical circumstances. According to him, these features are not predetermined and everlasting, hence the Oriental could be the Occidental and vice versa, which makes their identities interchangeable and variable.

Rihani goes on focusing on the importance of

the highest ideal of the prophets and the poets – the ideal of the soul – which includes the ethical and the practical aspects of life, and which is neither Oriental nor exclusively Occidental. It is supremely human. Before it every mark of birth disappears; and customs and traditions are held in abeyance, and the differences in nationality and language cease to be a hindrance to understanding. The soul seeking expression, the soul reaching out for the truth, is one everywhere. Confucius might be American in his ideal, even as he is Chinese, and Emerson might be Chinese, even if he is American. Cotama [sic] Buddha made manifest in London might be mistaken for Carlyle and Carlyle revisiting the glimpses of the moon in Japan might be mistaken for Cotama. Jelal-ud-Din Rumi, were he born in Assisi would have been a St. Francis; and St. Francis were he born in Shiraz would have been a Jelal-ud- Din. ... And genius everywhere is one. In the Orient and in the Occident the deep thinkers are kin, the poets are cousins, the pioneers of the spirit are the messengers of peace and goodwill to the world. Their works are the open highways between nations, and they themselves are the ever living guardians and guides. (9-10)

The kind of wisdom that Rihani is advocating here sets the mind free from national confines and egoistic interests, and gives it the advantage and privilege to perceive the other as a reflection of the self. Rihani's agent of proper perception is a soul seeking the truth; and accordingly, the souls seeking truth everywhere, in the East and the West, must meet on common ground.

This transcendentalist approach adopted by Rihani undermines the traditional Orientalist binary structure and offers a conciliatory alternative discourse that highlights his cultural translation project. Given that, it is not surprising that his translation of the

poetry of the classical Arab poet Abu'l-Ala al-Ma'arri (974-1058) entitled *The Quatrains of Abu'l-Ala* (1903) was his first English-language publication. The volume which included a selection of Al Ma'arri's poems was followed by another one entitled *The Luzumiyat of Abu'l-Ala* (1918). The choice of Rihani to inaugurate his English-language works with a literary translation of Al Ma'arri in particular rather than any other representatives of the Arabic literary tradition is highly noteworthy, as it was meant to further deconstruct and even challenge Orientalist scholarship. Al Ma'arri was a skeptical rationalist considered to be one of the most rational and intellectual of Arab poets. In his preface to *The Luzumiyat*, Rihani describes Al Ma'arri as “the Lucretius of Islam, the Voltaire of the East” (1918: 7), whose case challenges the idea of an exclusively spiritual East. A glimpse of Al Ma'arri's rationalism and skepticism towards all religions can be observed in the following extract from *The Quatrains*:

Another prophet will, they say, soon arise;  
But will he profit by his tricks, likewise?  
My prophet is my reason, aye, myself  
From me to me there is no room for lies. (Rihani 1903: 57)

Al Ma'arri believed in the existence of a non-partisan God whose majesty and magnificence he recognized, but these convictions held an anti-clerical and anti-sectarian sense of religion, as he definitely denied established religions and prophets. He believed that God created man and provided him with a mind and common sense to think, but on the other hand, He did not send messengers and prophets to guide him, nor did He reveal holy books to show him the right path and lead him to happiness.

Muhammad or Messiah! Hear thou me,  
The truth entire nor here nor there can be;  
How can our God who made the sun and moon  
Give all his light to one Sect, I can not see. (Rihani 1918: 35)

Al Ma'arri believed that God embraces all humanity regardless of creeds as he considered that religions were created by intelligent men for the sake of fulfilling their own interests.

Rihani was impressed by Al Ma'arri, who he describes as “a poet and a scholar of first rank, [and] also one of the foremost thinkers of his age” (Rihani 1918: 14), and who he considers an example of the limitation of the Orientalist discourse. Rihani is obviously trying to further deconstruct the essentialist image of a purely spiritual Orient through the introduction of the works of Al Ma'arri who appeared at a time “when Christendom was groping amid the superstitions of the Dark Ages” (Rihani 1918: 7). In other words, Rihani tries to demonstrate that the spirit of Enlightenment could have appeared in the East centuries before it did in Europe. More importantly, perhaps, Rihani believed that Al Ma'arri combined the best qualities of the rationalist West and the spiritual East, as his philosophy decreases the gap between the two poles. In this context, Hassan states that Al Ma'arri embodies the influence of Eastern knowledge on the West, “something that Rihani finds extremely significant because it reinforces the idea of Europe's indebtedness to the wisdom of the East in general, and to Arab civilization in particular, thereby undermining the supposed superiority of the West” (Hassan, 256). Rihani's constant deconstruction of the binary Orientalist scholarship, therefore, reveals the revisionary discourse that defines his own project of civilizational synthesis embodied by Al Ma'arri's philosophy and thought.

Rihani continued with his cultural translation project through writing in all three major Western literary genres. Not only was he the first Arab to write a novel in English, he was also the first Arab to write English verse. He published two poetry collections, *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905) and *A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems* (1921). In 1915, he wrote a play entitled *Wajdah* which was not published before 2001.

Rihani's novel in English, *The Book of Khalid*, published in 1911, was an inaugural work of Arab American writing, being the first book ever authored in English by an Arab. The book, illustrated by Kahlil Gibran, was the forerunner of the latter's most famous work, *The Prophet*. It is a philosophical and largely autobiographical work which represents a passionate plea for the reconciliation of the material and the spiritual, of East and West, of Christianity and Islam. The novel embodies the culmination of Rihani's concern with bridging East and West. Yet this book achieved little success, partly due to what Hassan describes as

its baffling admixture of philosophy and mysticism, its paradoxical tone at once solemn and ironical, its confusingly overwrought web of literary allusion, its alternation between utopianism and cynicism, and its enigmatic protagonist who seems at once to embody and satirize Rihani's own ideas (259).

The book is about a circular path that takes its protagonist from Lebanon on a westward journey to America and finally back to the Middle East, which makes it a story of returning home as well. Rihani compares the journey to the Stations of the Cross: "The voyage to America is the Via Dolorosa of the emigrant; and the Port of Beirut, the verminous hostelrys of Marseilles, the Island of Ellis in New York, are the three stations thereof" (29). In fact, the three sections of the book correspond to the three levels of the spiritual quest for awareness, hence the dedication "to my Brother Man, my Mother Nature and my Maker God" (Rihani 1911: v).

The novel is part of the synthesis of civilizations project advocated by Rihani as it embodies the writer's quest for a literary synthesis of East and West. The language of the book is a deliberately hybridized discourse consisting of constant cross-linguistic word play, untranslated Arabic vocabulary, and literal translations of Arabic phrases. According to Geoffrey Nash, Rihani's language in many of his English language writings

is framed in a discourse clearly borrowed from the Western Romantics, and at others in an idiom that reads like a literal translation from Arabic. What can be said of most of these writings is that in foregrounding the Arab and oriental constituency, they make little accommodation for a western readership in the sense of diluting and acculturating oriental idioms to suit occidental predispositions and expectations. (18)

This estrangement of the English language, therefore, makes it difficult for its native readers to decode this hybridized discourse, as probably only bi-cultural individuals, like Rihani himself, would be the ideal audience for this kind of writing. However, the book's pattern follows European models, like for example Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). The novel's protagonist Khalid is a naïve, idealistic and irreverent young Arab man from Ba'albek who is not content with conventions and institutions in Lebanon. In this sense, Evelyn Shakir states that,

Just like *Candide*, caught kissing the baron's daughter (rumored to be his cousin), is set upon by the baron and literally kicked out of the "terrestrial paradise" of Westphalia, so – in a cockeyed echo of that scene – Khalid, in love with *his* cousin, is beaten from the door by *her* father, whereupon he sets out a journey not away from, but in search of, "the Paradise of the World" (1996: 6).

America is the Paradise that Khalid and his close friend Shakib leave Lebanon to reach. Once in New York, "the wonder-working, wealth-worshipping city" (Rihani 1911: 33), Khalid goes through the experience of an intellectual awakening which finally takes him back home.

During his New York experience, Khalid works in peddling, frequents atheist circles, then experiments cult groups and free love, and is finally introduced to Tammany Hall and American politics, which leads him to end up in prison. Disillusion and disenchantment mark Khalid's experience in America as he is shocked and appalled by the crudeness and cruel materialism he sees around him. He reaches the conclusion that Americans "are all true and honest votaries of Mammon, their Great God, their one



and only God. And is it not natural that the Demiurgic Dollar should be the national Deity of America? Have not deities been always conceived after man's needs and aspirations?" (112). Nonetheless, he looks ahead to an America which might yet fulfill its promise as he states that,

My faith in man ... is as strong as my faith in God. And as strong, too, perhaps, is my faith in the future world-ruling destiny of America. In this New World, the higher Superman shall rise... but he shall not be an American in the Democratic sense. He shall be nor of the Old World nor of the New; he shall be my Brother, of both. In him shall be incarnated the Asiatic spirit of Poesy and Prophecy, and the European spirit of Art, and the American spirit of Invention. (113-14)

Hence, although his critique of his adopted country is undoubtedly devastating, Khalid nevertheless sees great possibilities in America.

Exhausted by his spiritual and intellectual struggles, together with his experience in America, Khalid returns back to Lebanon where he finds no less corruption than he has witnessed in the New World. Changed by his years in America, he no longer fits into the old society. After a series of problems with the Maronite church which leads to his excommunication, he retreats to the woods sick in body and soul. Once there, Khalid lives off the land after a hermit's invitation: "Come, let us till and cultivate the vineyard together" (226), which alludes to *Candide* and his resolution: "Let us cultivate our garden." Khalid spends a year there, similar to "Thoreau's passage through Walden Wood" (194), where he undergoes a spiritual transformation through his contact with nature. After that, he emerges from the woods as a new man who returns to society and goes forth to help his countrymen. After his spiritual rebirth, he decides to engage in politics until he disappears in Egypt later. He moves from spiritual and mystical concerns to a political commitment to a Pan-Arab nationalism, which reflects Rihani's own experience.

The message that Khalid preaches when he emerges from the woods conveys the core of Rihani's philosophy:

I am equally devoted both to the material and the spiritual... For the dervish who whirls himself into a foaming ecstasy of devotion and the strenuous American who works himself up to a sweating ecstasy of gain, are the two poles of the same absurdity, the two ends of one evil (237-38).

Thus, Khalid shows a mixture of the mystical and the practical, evoking some of the prominent features of transcendentalism such as idealism and social activism. Rihani's reference to Thoreau, Whitman and Emerson, among others, demonstrates the significant influence of transcendentalism on him. His social activism found its expression in Pan-Arabism, just as Thoreau's social activism found its expression in abolitionism.

As Shakir states, *The Book of Khalid* (1911) "is a sampler of voices and genres borrowed from a crowd of European and American authors. Next to Voltaire, Carlyle is the most obvious model, and among Americans, Emerson and Whitman. Each of these men is referred to in the book, as are many others with whom Rihani enters into brief or extended dialogue" (1996: 6). The reference to all these writers was apparently intended to establish Rihani's credentials, as it implicitly includes "the claim that here is an 'Oriental' who can run with Western writers, who can match their erudition, their tone, their wordplay..." Rihani's objective seems to be to claim "respect for himself, and by implication, for his people" (Shakir 1996: 6). Therefore, *The Book of Khalid* (1911) was a fundamental piece in Rihani's project which, despite the anomalies and defects it may have, remains a brave effort, taking into account the historical circumstances of the time, together with the discursive conditions whether in the Arab world or in America and Europe during that period. His valiant challenging of the Orientalist discourse and his efforts at cultural translation constructed for a cross-cultural interaction. However,

his works remain unknown and generally ignored, which seems to be the fate of the Easterners who questioned the Orientalist modes of representation. The works of these kinds of writers were regarded as “cultural oddit[ies]” (Nash, 25), while others like Gibran, for instance, who conformed to those models were able to achieve worldwide success. Gibran, in fact, presented a domesticated “Orient” that hardly challenged America’s modes of perception or self-image.

This anxiety of Arab American literature of the time to prove itself worthy in the US context was even more apparent in some of the autobiographies of the period. Lisa Suhair Majaj writes that

immigrant autobiographies before the 1950’s were oriented toward the American context: indeed, their texts which draw on the conventions of American immigrant autobiography, provided a vehicle through which authors could write themselves into existence as Americans. In their autobiographies, Arab identity is mediated through strategies of containment and situated within a broad claim to American identity. (1999: 68).

Following the already-established genre of immigrant autobiography, the Lebanese-born Protestant minister Abraham Mitrie Rihbany (1869-1944) published his own autobiography, entitled *A Far Journey* (1914), where he narrates his journey into Americanization. While Rihbany, who reached New York in 1892 at the age of 22, tries to depict the traditional quest of the immigrant, he places a special emphasis on his origin in the “Holy Land” as well as on his Christian identity, in “an attempt to engage American readers and familiarize the ‘exotic’, while at the same time seeking to distance [himself] from Islam” (Majaj 2000: 328). Rihbany tries to make a biblical framing of the East as he “draws heavily on biblical themes, structuring his text along the pattern of scriptural discourse” (328). The dominance of “Christian imagery” aims to validate Syria, being part of the Holy Land, as the origin of Christian spirituality. In this context, in the opening chapter of the book, he makes connections between his own

birth and Christ's. He describes friends visiting the house of his family and how they sang and were exceedingly glad, because "unto them a child was born, a son was given." Entering the room where "the day old babe and its mother lay," they "brought their presents with them as did the 'Wise Men' of old on their historic visit to Bethlehem" (Rihbany 1914: 4). After forty days, his mother took him to the church, where the priest "took [him] in his arms, as the aged Simeon took the infant Jesus" (5).

The book's endless biblical metaphors and parallels reflect Rihbany's efforts "to make the point that Syrian immigrants were not simply the recipients of American largesse, but had something of great value to their new country: an ancient spiritual heritage" (Majaj 2000: 328). Accordingly, this use of Christian identity makes allusion to the Arab American community's struggle to gain acceptance and be included as white Americans. This effort is further echoed in the deliberate engagement in the strategic distancing from Islam, and which can be observed in Rihbany's support of stereotypes against Muslims. He mentions the instructions he received before his journey to Beirut: "I was not to gaze curiously at the Mohammedans, whom I knew by their white turbans. They considered us *Kuffar* (infidels) and enemies of the faith; therefore they were ever ready for the slightest provocation to beat or even kill us" (Rihbany 1914: 81). According to Majaj, this example illustrates how Rihbany tries to make obvious "the difference between Muslims and Christians", and at the same time he "played upon stereotypes of Muslims (here called by the inaccurate American term 'Mohammedan') as violent" (2000: 328). This rejection of his Muslim counterparts tries to further situate Christian Syrian immigrants in the American context, as his strategy implies highlighting the affinity of Syrians with Christianity and consequently with the West. In a later book entitled *The Syrian Christ* (1916), he writes that "whatever else Jesus was, as regards his modes of thought and life and his method of teaching, he was a

Syrian of the Syrians. According to authentic history Jesus never saw any other country than Palestine” (4).

Like other early Arab American writers, Rihbany accepts the Orientalist distinction between East and West. In his self-assigned task of mediator between the Christian East and the West, he adopts an essentialist approach while tackling these two parts. In this light, East and West, represented in Rihbany’s narrative by Syria and America, are configured as fixed entities, with mutually exclusive characteristics. As Said sustains in *Orientalism* (1978), for the native in general, and for the native intellectual formed in the West in particular, there exists the possibility of internalizing the stereotypical and rigid categorizations mediating the construction of Orientalist discourse (322-25). This form of integration might be manifested in the use of the language of authenticity, by “the native informant,” the representation of the past, or the reinforcement of dichotomies between East and West (324). Rihbany’s portrayal of his native country Syria is based on a homogenization process achieved, as I have already mentioned, through its association with myths, mysticism and spirituality. Moreover, Syria is configured as the mother from whom he can claim descent, “Syria, my loving untutored mother”, while America is considered as “my virile, resourceful teacher” (Rihbany 1914: ix). In his efforts to establish a safe distance between his Syrian past and American present, Rihbany resorts to the gendering of Syria and America, as he inscribes his Syrian past in a maternal context where Syria is depicted as “untutored” and steeped in the feminine, while America emerges as the “virile” educator, a symbol of Rihbany’s access to the masculine realm, where reason, education, and structure are celebrated. Not only is the East associated with the child-self of the narrator whose mother, Syria, suffers from lack of education and the impossibility of accessing the higher levels of civilization, but it is also made to speak for the carnal. As Said argues,

“the association between the Orient and sex is remarkably persistent. The Middle East is resistant, as any virgin would be, but the male scholar wins the prize by bursting open, penetrating through the Gordian knot...” (1978: 309). Sexual imagery relegates the East to the realm of the flesh, which, according to Western dichotomies, is configured in opposition to reason and intellectual sophistication.

Nevertheless, the critic Evelyn Shakir gives little importance to the Orientalist content of Rihbany’s autobiography. She highlights the book’s “strong sense of audience and its eagerness to instruct” as it “continued Rihbany’s early career as a lecturer on the Orient.” She notes that while Syrian peddlers used to sell holy objects, like rosaries and olive-wood crosses, from Jerusalem and the Holy Land, Rihbany’s work was not different from theirs as he “resorted to a religious discourse”. She argues that

While crammed with biblical allusion, his was calmer, more Protestant discourse, neither prophetic nor hortatory. It was instead the unthreatening and familiar voice of the good-humored teacher/minister explicating a text on a Sunday morning (which is exactly who Rihbany was and what he did). In interpreting East to West, Rihbany relied on a religious mythology more deeply rooted in the western psyche than was a titillating Orientalism. The Bible was the best answer to the *Arabian Nights*. (Shakir 1988: 43)

Shakir maintains that the goal of Rihbany is to reinterpret the East to the West and to preach to an audience with pre-established concepts about Arabs, “draw[ing] connections between Bible stories and the life of his people” (43), which consequently allows him to claim Americanness in favor of Syrian immigrants. Accordingly, Rihbany and early Arab American writers participated in the community’s efforts to prove themselves worthy in the American context, and therefore claim respect for themselves and for their people without trying to hide their Arab origins (Shakir 1996: 6). This was

not the case with the next generation of Arab Americans taking into account the general atmosphere in the United States.

## **1.2 Second Generation of Arab American Writers**

After a phase of considerable literary presence by Arab immigrants in the US, the next decades witnessed the suspension of the Arab American literary project, which entered a period of stillness. The few writings published then reflected the assimilation process which the community rapidly went through during the assimilationist decades of American ideology, mainly after World War I and especially with the 1924 Johnson-Reed Quota Act that drastically limited the number of immigrants arriving at U. S. shores until 1965. Thus, very few Arabic-speaking immigrants made their way across the Atlantic during the interwar period marked by the Great Depression and anti-immigrant sentiment. Consequently, communication with the homeland was ruptured, reinforcing the sense of isolation among the community which had to fall back on its own resources. By World War II, the Arab American community was virtually indistinguishable from the larger American society. The absence of ongoing contact with the homeland made Syrian Americans turn their attention towards domestic news. The number of Arabic language newspapers declined dramatically, which indicates the little interest in, as well as the ignorance of, the Arabic language among the second generation of Syrian Americans. Naff states that “[a]ttempts to teach Arabic to children at home and in private schools competed unsuccessfully with the Americanization process” (1983: 19). As a result, by the time the second generation of Arab Americans came of age, they did not speak Arabic and had only a superficial understanding and a diminished awareness of their Arab heritage. They were thoroughly immersed in

American society and culture. As Evelyn Shakir argues, “[the Syrians’] American born children – those who came of age in the 1930’s, 1940’s, and 1950’s – costumed themselves as ‘regular Americans’ and hoped to pass, which may be why they produced so little literature” (1996: 6).

Majaj notes that during this period, “although there was not a complete dearth of literary production,” the second generation of “Arab American writers wrote about their Arab background with hesitation and through self-distancing narrative strategies.”<sup>5</sup> The major Arab American writers of the time, Vance Bourjaily (1922-2010) and William Peter Blatty (1928- ), whose works embody the culmination of the assimilative process, showed a deep-seated ambivalence toward Arab ethnicity. Tanyss Ludescher states that these writers “perceived themselves as mainstream writers and did not identify as Arab Americans” (101), which reveals the pressure on authors to ignore and distance themselves from their Arab identity.

Vance Bourjaily was the son of a Lebanese father and an American mother, whose literary career emerged out of World War II. His autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960), including his war experience in the Middle East, dedicates only one chapter, “The Fractional Man,” to ethnicity, where he briefly explores the issue of ethnic identity. Quince, the novel’s protagonist, has Bourjaily’s mixed heritage. He explains that his parental heritage “was not particularly a secret, rather something which my father dismissed.” This father, “busy being an American,” has brought up his son “not so much to conceal as to ignore” (Bourjaily 1960: 238) his Lebanese background. He has learnt almost nothing about his ancestors’ homeland from his father, but rather from the outside. As a result, this lack of knowledge leads Quince to carry an American attitude to the Arab world, as all his perceptions are dictated by

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<sup>4</sup> Majaj, Lisa Suhair. “Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments.” *American Studies journal*. Number 52. 2008. 29 June 2009. <<http://www.asjournal.org/archive/52/150.html>>



the West. In fact, the novel does not focus on the traditional ethnic writer's bildungsroman structure that implies the protagonist's reconciliation with their ethnicity, since from the beginning of the novel, the protagonist has revealed his choice of not belonging to, nor identifying with any group or community:

In the fluid society through which I move there is no... community of moral belief; it cannot hold itself nor me its child, to any comprehensive and unquestioned single code. And though there are many groups within this society which guard separate if often overlapping codes, I am in no very unusual position when I say I belong to none of them - I am more or less without class or national origin or locality or regular intellectual persuasion, as is true of many men of my time (22).

Quince tries to free himself from any responsibility to his ethnic belonging. It is only during World War II that he winds up at his father's birthplace in Lebanon when he serves in the Middle East. This lack of identification with his Arab background carries what Evelyn Shakir describes as "an anti-Arab bias" (1993: 67) as Bourjaily mentions that his views on Palestine were "vaguely Zionist" (1960: 247). Quincy even says that "[w]e seemed to be on the wrong side of the Crusades" (239). During his World War II service in the Middle East, Shakir comments, he "views it through the lens of European literature" (1993:67). Indeed, in Aden, he sees a group of men holding whips supervising naked laborers. "I think of Rimbaud and of the legend that it was in such an antique port, to become such an overseer that he disappeared... I feel his whip in my hand" (Bourjaily 1960: 239). Afterward, in Suez, Quince pretends to be an Arab, and convinces the natives: "The prank allies him with Europeans like Richard Burton and E. W. Lane, who also donned Arab gear, and speaks again to his lack of identification with Arab people" (Shakir 1993: 67).

Nevertheless, after this "role-playing" at being Arab, he returns to Kabb Elias, his father's ancestral village in Lebanon, for a short trip, where he discovers that his roots go deeper into his Lebanese heritage than he has believed. Welcomed with open

arms by his great-aunt Naife and her extended family, he experiences a feeling of kinship and belonging that has eluded him in American society. Yet, this feeling of belonging is only temporary and cannot provide permanent relief for the modern American condition. He expresses his admiration for the peasant culture that his father and grandmother left behind, and even thinks that he might have been as “simple and steadfast and proud” as his Lebanese cousins, instead of a modern American, “uselessly complicated and discontent” (Bourjaily 1960: 272). Quince’s case mirrors the invisibility of Arab immigrants’ American-born children who scarcely acknowledge their heritage. Therefore, this obviously reflects the invisibility of the community as a whole during this period.

While indifference might describe Bourjaily’s attitude towards his Arab American background, William Peter Blatty, best known as the writer of *The Exorcist* (1971), was actually immersed and overwhelmed by his ethnic identity. His comic autobiographical novel entitled *Which way to Mecca, Jack?* (1960) describes the life of the narrator and protagonist William Blatty who grows up in the United States as the child of immigrant Lebanese parents. If Bourjaily denies his ethnic tradition, Blatty just resents it, as the novel displays the author’s embarrassment with his Lebanese heritage, which he constantly tries hard to escape. He begins the first chapter by confusing racial categories of descent and then declaring them irrelevant: “My mother is an Arab, which would make me half Arab, except that my father was an Arab too. But already I digress” (1960: 13). His Arab mother figure, as Shakir points out, is “the embodiment of his ethnic heritage”. She continues: “Out of embarrassment, pain, or the desire of a quick buck, he has let outsiders (or the outsider in himself) dictate his mother’s portrait, has in fact claimed to see her as would an amused, detached, but not unkindly Western spectator (1991: 11). Blatty personifies his Arab background in the burlesque portrait of

his mean and domineering mother who never misses an opportunity to humiliate him. In this context, in front of the girls William tries to impress, she makes such comments as, “My God, my Will-yam he *never dirty his diaper!*” (11).

Blatty’s suffering from his ethnic identity starts during his childhood when the other kids always remind him of his foreignness through their cruel jokes, as when they mock him saying, “So wotta you, a camel?” (14). The little William, therefore, longs to get rid of the burden of his background, which makes him wish to be taken for a member of a minority higher on the race hierarchical system. “How I envied the Irish boys their snub noses, their pale skins,” he says. “But... I was usually content to look forward to the now-and-then occasions when someone would call me ‘dago’ or ‘wop’, for at least the Italians were a majority minority” (29). William’s struggle to fit in as a white reflects Blatty’s complex of being Arab as well as his own wish to assimilate into mainstream white America. Here the Arab American desire for whiteness is explored in William’s secret wish to be a pale-faced Irish boy, as well as in his mother’s breaking up of the friendship young William forges with the African American girl Frankie (21). Nevertheless, when he later tries to get an opportunity in Hollywood as an actor, he is rejected as being too “Biblical.” Not only does he fail to pass as a white person for an all-American hero role, but he is also rejected for the part of an Arab character. Indeed, when he tries to get a role in the movie *The Ten Commandments*, he is turned down on the grounds that he is not authentic enough because of his blue eyes. Thus, according to American standards, he neither fits in as a white nor does he meet Orientalist expectations of Arabness. As Majaj explains, Blatty’s “autobiography makes clear that challenging American racial hierarchies is as difficult as challenging Orientalist stereotypes” (2000: 329).

To prove his Americanness, Blatty enlists in the US Information Agency (USIS), a government agency dedicated to the promotion of American policies and culture outside the United States. He spends two years on a tour of duty in Lebanon where he learns to appreciate his Lebanese background, but he remains angry with Hollywood. As soon as he comes back to the US, he decides to avenge himself. "I've got to make them accept me" (Blatty 1960: 189), he says. In fact, he returns to Hollywood disguised as an Arabian prince, and exploits the worst Orientalist stereotypes to impress and ultimately mock the naive Hollywood bigwigs, as "Hollywood swallows it all" (Shakir 1993: 68). He easily manages to get access to the insider parties, film studios and nightclubs which were barred to William Blatty, the blue-eyed Arab American with a talent for acting. Blatty achieves his objective through caricaturing Arabs in order to prove himself "authentic." Nevertheless, as Shakir observes, "Hollywood has embraced not William Blatty, Arab American, but Prince Khairallah Al Aswad el Xeer, a personification of its own romantic (and essentially Orientalist) fantasies about the East. To win the favor of an industry that trades in images, he has had to turn himself into a cartoon Arab" (68). In addition to that, the very stereotypes which Blatty exposes "seem to be virtually the only way he himself can speak of Arabs" (Shakir 1991: 10). In this sense, Blatty recurs to slap-stick humor as a defense against the pain of being excluded from US mainstream society and, on the other hand, undermines the notion of Arab Americans as an "alien" race. He creates a self-denigrating comic narrative where he satirizes his memories and everything related to his ethnic heritage in order to seek acceptance. In this context, Tanyss Ludescher observes that "*Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* is a farce, a self mocking parody of ethnic life, which uses humor to dispel the angst of being different and foreign. By making himself ridiculous, Blatty can appear less frightening and alien to his all-American audience" (2006: 102).

This hesitancy to engage with Arab American identity which marked the writings of the second generation of American writers with an Arab background gradually gave way to a new ethnic consciousness that led later generations of this community to embrace Arab American ethnicity. As Michael Suleiman points out, by World War II, there was no trace of a distinguishable Arab American community as they were completely assimilated into mainstream American society. However, “it took a second wave of immigration and other developments to rekindle interest in their Arab heritage and to revive them as an ethnic community” (1999: 9). In this context, Alixa Naff writes that “if political and economic events had not reactivated Arab immigration and an interest in Arab culture, [Arab] Americans might have Americanized themselves out of existence” (1983: 23).

### **1.3 The Emergence of an Arab American Consciousness**

The second and third waves of Arab immigration to the US, respectively from 1945 to 1967 and from 1967 to the present, brought new components that would help change the community’s attitude to become more self-conscious and active. The post-World War II Arab immigration was much more diverse and significantly differed from early immigrant pioneers. While the first wave of Arab immigrants consisted mainly of Christians who came exclusively from the region of Greater Syria, the second and third waves were largely comprised of Muslims from all parts of the Arab world, including North Africa. The new arrivals’ reasons for immigration were not so much economic as because of regional conflicts like the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli wars, as well as civil wars in Lebanon and Yemen, for instance. Many of these immigrants were seeking a democratic haven where they could enjoy

freedom without political or economic harassment. Moreover, these two waves, unlike the early one, included large numbers of highly educated professionals as well as students at American universities who decided to remain there. This constitutes what Alixa Naff calls the “Arab ‘brain drain’ [which] reached its highest point between 1968 and 1971” (1983: 24).

The first wave of Arab immigrants had been overwhelmingly composed of Lebanese Christians who, although invariably classified as Syrians, rejected for the most part any Arab national commitments or identifications, maintaining their cultural and social links to their home country while seeking assimilation in the US by claiming their right to be categorized as white citizens. The second and third waves of Arab immigrants, however, proved to be less prone to assimilation since they largely included Muslims and individuals who maintained strong Arab national identities (Saliba 1999: 311-12). Immigrants who arrived after World War II were better prepared as “settlement and adjustment have been considerably easier” for them, for “they have the advantages of education, language, special skills, and the communities and precedents already established by the Syrians” (Naff 1983: 24). Furthermore, these highly politicized and nationalistic new immigrants were familiar with the Pan-Arab movement in their homelands, so that they “have succeeded in arousing ethnic loyalty among the Americanized generations and have also taught them what their parents had not – that the label Arab includes both Muslims and Christians” (Naff 1983: 25). The recent immigrants were considerably less sectarian than early immigrants who were united and divided by social and religious issues rather than by broad political questions. However, this sectarian allegiance gradually declined among the latter’s American-born descendants. This emerging consciousness was in many ways steadily shaped by the events back in the Arab world, so much so that the Syrian-Lebanese

clubs, which had had a predominantly social agenda in the beginning, started to shift towards politics. In parallel with the associations created by the new arrivals, these clubs started to become unified under regional federations whose objective was to inform American public opinion about Arab countries and attempt to influence policy in the United States toward that part of the world. As Naff asserts, “these organizations initiated the consciousness-raising process in the United States that would accelerate after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war” (183: 26).

Another war in the Old World represents a new turning point in the history of the Arab presence in the United States. “As World War I had marked a watershed for the early Arab immigrants, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war did for the entire community” (Suleiman 1999: 10). The “Six-Day War” in June 1967, widely known as Al-Naksah in Arabic (the Setback), was a trauma for both Arab American communities, the older and the newer; and the shock was actually three-sided. The unexpected victory of Israel over the neighboring Arab countries resulted in the loss of the rest of historic Palestine, including East Jerusalem, which fell under Israeli military occupation, as well as the occupation of extensive territories from Jordan, Syria and Egypt. Arab nations and most Arabs all over the world felt humiliated by the defeat. Christian Arab Americans, for instance, worried about the fate of Christians in the Holy Land, as the war led to the displacement of thousands of Palestinians, Christians and Muslims alike, outside of their territories. Arab Americans, as Philip Kayal explains, felt “the very seat of their religious origins is threatened with extinction” (1983: 57). Arab churches contributed to the efforts of fund raising “for all the refugees whether Christian or Muslim and regardless of nationality” (57). The fate of their homelands was the motive for an increasing concern, emphasized by their unanimous support of the Palestinian-Arab

population and opposition to Israel and the Zionist project in the region. In this perspective,

A particular issue which has especially distressed the Syrian-Lebanese community in America has been Israel's change in the status of Jerusalem, a city sacred to Muslims and Christians alike. The Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem represented a radical distortion of the city's historical and spiritual significance. It has further confirmed the suspicion that Zionism set apart the Jews as "special people" with unique rights and privileges which would be exercised at the expense of other people. (1983: 57)

Kayal mentions the example of the Antiochian (Syrian) Orthodox as the most outspoken Arab American Christians who

went on record urging the then United Nations Secretary General U-Thant to convene the Security Council to scrutinize breaches in the 1967 General Assembly resolution protesting the annexation of the Arab section of Jerusalem by Israel. This annexation, they argued, was forced in unilateral defiance of world opinion and international and moral law. The recent physical changes made in Jerusalem by Israeli occupation forces were also condemned, since the changes were made arbitrarily and without regard for the wishes of the indigenous inhabitants. (1983: 57-58)

Apart from the consequences of the 1967 war on the Arab homelands, Arab Americans were shocked and disappointed by the U.S. official support of Israel, and most importantly US media one-sided and pro-Israeli reporting on the Middle East. Arab Americans were dismayed by the increasing hostility and anti-Arab bias in the American press. Kayal points out that the negative portrayal of Arabs as well as their culture reached such an extent that Arab Americans believed "their image in the mass media was foreign to their own experience and self-understanding. They became tired of being the victims of the 'new racism' which blames all Arabs for the suffering of the Jews, when in fact, Arab nations sheltered the world's persecuted (Armenians, Circassians, Jews and others) for centuries" (56). The enemies of Israel were consistently portrayed in U.S. media as "the Arabs," a designation that was intended to



demonize the people belonging to the Arab World who were actively resisting Ottoman, European and Zionist colonial regimes. This compelled Arab Americans to rethink their identities in response to U.S. government policies and American media representation. More and more members of the community started to call themselves “Arabs,” in solidarity with the people being savaged in the American media.

As Michael Suleiman comments, “the war itself also produced soul-searching on the part of many Arab Americans, old and new, and often reinforced and strengthened their Arab identity” (1999: 10). They became more at ease with their Arab background as this war experience allowed them to positively interpret their Arab origins. In this respect, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad points out that, “the realities of prejudices that were fostered by the sentiments engendered during and after the war were confronted directly, and Arabs were forced both to articulate and defend their right to be considered full US citizens” (79-80). The Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG), for instance, was established in 1967 in order to meet the expectations of Arab Americans during that period. Suleiman argues that the AAUG “was the first post-World War II national, credible, nonsectarian organization seeking to represent diverse elements of the Arab American community and to advance an Arab rather than regional or country orientation” (1999: 12).

This Association was able to provide forums within the United States to express an Arab American position on the issues of the day, while at the same time it aimed to create a space for Arab American academics nationwide, so as to build and maintain bridges to the Arab world through its publications, conferences and seminars. Hence, the AAUG was committed to providing accurate scientific, educational and cultural information about the Arab World necessary for the creation of a favorable atmosphere for mutual respect and understanding between Arabs and

Americans. While the organization's objectives were mainly educational and informational, it tried as well to provide adequate means of responding to discriminatory treatment of Arab Americans in the U. S. It participated in the fostering of a generation of Arab-Americans who, though professionally successful and culturally assimilated, strongly adhered to the cultural and linguistic unity of the Arabs. The AAUG, therefore, tried to revive and strengthen the ties between Arab Americans and the Arab World, and to enhance their own perception of themselves as Americans with an Arab heritage. In this respect, Kayal considers that besides the 1967 war, the creation of the AAUG was "another milestone in the evolution of an Arab-American ethno-political community" (1983: 59).

The increasing political tensions between America and the Arab World in the second half of the twentieth century, especially following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, galvanized a "rising ethnopolitical consciousness" among the Arab American community, while simultaneously instigating, according to Arab American scholar Nadine Naber, "the beginning of [the community's] social, political, and cultural marginalization" (1998: 3). The rise of this consciousness was paralleled by the surfacing of an important body of Arab American literature oriented rather towards poetry, and waving between the ethnic discourse and themes independent from ethnic perspectives. The writers who were prolific during what Elmaz Abinader describes as the "transitional period" in Arab American literature, extending from the late sixties to the late eighties, would pave the path to the next generation of Arab American literary production highly oriented towards an Arab American context. Abinader considers that contemporary Arab American writers are linked to their early twentieth-century precedents, mainly Al Mahjar writers, by the "transitional" writers like Samuel Hazo, D. H. Melhem, Etel Adnan. They "distinguished themselves initially as writers

independent of ethnic categorization who later donned the cloak of the Arab American identity... [These writers] have paved the way for the current generation of Arab American writers, of which they are still very much a part” (2000: 12).

Hazo, with his nearly thirty-year poetic career, is the founder of the International Poetry Forum at the University of Pittsburgh in 1966. In 1993 he was appointed the first official State Poet of Pennsylvania. As for the poet, novelist and scholar D. H. Melhem, her first poetry volume entitled *Notes on the 94<sup>th</sup> Street* (1972) has been recognized as the first poetry collection in English by an Arab American woman, although the poems do not focus specifically on Arab American identity. Rather, the poems illustrate life in New York, evoking the atmosphere of the city’s Upper West Side. Her book entitled *Heroism in the New Black Poetry* (UPK, 1990) was undertaken with a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship and won an American Book Award in 1991. Melhem’s clear introductions and frank interviews provide insight into the contemporary social and political consciousness of six acclaimed women poets. She “has developed a recognition of the importance of the underrepresented cultures in American literature. Her critical studies of African American writers – in particular Gwendolyn Brooks – have been highly praised” (Abinader 2000:13). In addition, Melhem has helped Arab American literature by organizing the first Arab American poetry reading at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1984. The poet, artist and novelist Etel Adnan, on the other hand, has a more international than American reputation. Although her early works were written in French, most of her later ones were written in English. Her first poetry volume *Moonshots* was published in 1966. She has made an important contribution to feminist and postcolonial literature through her novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, first published in French in 1977, and then translated into English in 1982. The novel, a fiercely feminist portrayal of the Lebanese civil war,

has recently attained the status of “an underground classic” (Majaj and Amireh 2002: 13).

Abinader notes that these writers and poets “were not only a bridge between the two highly enculturated generations but also direct links between Arab American writing and the American literary canon” (2000: 13). In this way, the important and formative investigations of U.S.-based identity issues, as well as international concerns, presented by figures such as Hazo, Melhem, and Adnan significantly contributed toward setting the stage for a full-blown flourishing of Arab American literature during the last two decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Poetry dominated the Arab American literary production of the period which culminated in the publication of a small volume of poetry in 1982 entitled *Wrapping the Grape Leaves: a Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poets*, edited by Gregory Orfalea, and published by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, within a year of its founding. This landmark publication, being the first Arab American anthology, significantly revealed the evolution of Arab Americans’ sense of themselves. Six years later, a larger and more comprehensive anthology was published. Edited by Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* represents what Majaj calls “a major event” as “its presence in bookstores and on library shelves made it possible for general readers to discover ‘Arab American Literature’ as a category on computer data-bases and in card catalogues” (1996: 71-72). The collection includes the works of some twenty poets ranging from Gibran and Rihani to American-born poets who came of age after the 1960’s. The publication of both anthologies, therefore, marked a defining moment in the history of Arab American literature, as not only do they provide readers and scholars with a resource center for Arab American writers, but they also represent an important location for the self-representation of Arab

Americans in the articulation of their identity. Karen Kilcup states that “composing an anthology creates a miniature canon” (2000: 37), which suggests the role of these two collections in asserting the existence and presence of Arab writers and poets. In this way, both anthologies created a sense of an Arab American literary community, and introduced Arab American works to a new audience. Hence, literary anthologies provide good material for the study of Arab American engagement with race and racialization. In this context, Michelle Hartman points out that

anthologies reinforce community identification with specific prize qualities, often identified as inherent qualities. Very often these essential characteristics are drawn upon to firm up and solidify community identity, such as poetry being in the “Arab blood” or the closeness of family and kinship ties. Because they are often deemed inherent and essential, such notions then contribute to the process of racialization of Arab Americans in the United States. (172)

However, Majaj notes that the predominance of poetry in Arab American literary production did not make it accessible to mainstream audiences. Arab American writers leaned rather towards verse to assert their identity, and therefore celebrate their ethnicity. She argues that

Given our history of both exclusion and invisibility, it is no surprise that Arab-American writers have felt the need to celebrate who we are and to mourn what we have lost. But as a genre, poetry has not always provided a forum within which we have been able to probe the full complexity of our experience as Arab-Americans, or to levy a sustained critique of our internal community dynamics. (1999: 70)

Majaj highlights the importance of the shift towards prose writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, as being more expansive and explanatory than the lyric mode. In this context, the early 1990’s witnessed the emergence of a growing body of Arab American literature leaning towards prose writing. Majaj mentions an explanation rather “sociological in focus: we have produced more poetry than prose because as a small and

beleaguered ethnic group we have only recently begun to feel established enough to turn to serious literary endeavors” (1999: 69).

While the predominance of poetry in early Arab American literature can be explained by the strong poetic tradition in the Arab homeland, it also makes reference to the experience of other ethnic groups in the United States such as Asian Americans. In this context, the central genre of the Asian American movement of the seventies was poetry and not prose. *Bridge*, an early Asian American magazine which allocated considerable space to culture, dedicated an issue to Asian American poetry in 1976. Moreover, “the first Asian American literary magazine, *Aion*, was founded by two poets; and anthologies such as *Roots: An Asian American Reader* included generous selections of poetry— and no fiction” (Yu, 288-89).

#### **1.4 Embracing Arab American Ethnicity**

Arab American literature began to flower in the 1990’s. This period opened the way for the publication of a growing literary body produced by Arab American writers, and the acquiring of an increasing mainstream audience. Judith Gabriel points out that “in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new generation of Arab American writers came of age, immigrants and the descendents of immigrants, those who were born here and speak nary a word of Arabic, and connected in varying degrees to their heritage culture” (2001).<sup>6</sup> The contemporary Arab American writers’ contribution is so significant as Arab American literature is growing more sophisticated in scope and wider in content. This literature represents the voices of the community and tries to translate Arab American characterizations into wider cultural contexts. These writers are more and

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel, Judith. “Emergence of a Genre: Reviewing Arab American Writers.” *Al Jadid*, Vol. 7, N°34, Winter 2001. 20 March 2004. [http://old.aljadid.com/essays\\_and\\_features/0734gabriel.html](http://old.aljadid.com/essays_and_features/0734gabriel.html)

more challenging established cultural and racial boundaries in their articulation of Arab American identity. This dissertation studies some of the major issues and themes handled by a majority of contemporary Arab American writers, and thus hopes to contribute to the efforts aiming to situate Arab American literature within the broad spectrum of American letters.

Majaj highlights “contemporary writers’ efforts to grapple more directly with the racialization and politicization of Arab American experience and to assert their Arab American identity without apology” (2000: 330). They are consciously building bridges to other communities of color as part of their struggle to reinforce the Arab American discourse within its American multicultural context, and therefore help Arab Americans to be recognized as a minority group within the US social, cultural and literary arenas. However, racial classification remains one of the challenges facing the community. The US Census Bureau situates it within the “white/Caucasian” category, which prevents the community from enjoying a legal position within the spectrum of minority groups which would allow it to legally articulate its communal concerns about discrimination. While they are still officially white, “the interjection of race issues circled around the proposition that Arabs are not quite white” (Samhan 1999: 219). In fact, Samhan considers that the official classification of Arab Americans from the Middle East and North Africa “as part of the white majority” does not resolve confusions regarding their racial status (1999: 219). These ambiguous racial positions convey the Arab American collective’s history in the United States, from early Arab immigration to the present time, as the community’s identity has been transformed “from nonwhite, to white, to somewhere outside the limits of racial categories” (Saliba 1999: 311). From this perspective, Louise Cainkar notes how “Arabs have experienced the double burden of being excluded from whiteness and from mainstream recognition as people of color”

(2008: 49). Not only are they considered “not quite white” but also “not of color enough.”

This complex location of Arab Americans in multicultural America further complicates the unstable Arab American identity. Their white classification is rather what Majaj describes as a “merely ‘honorary’ status” allowing the group a tentative access to American white society, while this “whiteness” turns to be “readily stripped away at moments of crisis” (1999: 321). As I have already mentioned, this ambiguous status of “honorary whiteness,” on the one hand, allows the exclusion of Arab Americans from the white category, and, on the other, prevents them from having an ethnic minority status. Consequently, the Arab American community is evidently situated in an unstable racial space, which increases its precariousness and vulnerability to racism and discrimination. In this context, Nabeel Abraham argues that “unlike other forms of racism, anti-Arab racism is often tolerated by mainstream society” (1994: 170). Majaj states that “the hostility towards Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners in the United States that peaked during the 1980’s and that continues to spiral during periods of political tension has not abated. It appears that Arab Americans are one of the few ethnic groups which is still ‘safe to hate’” (1999: 321).

September 11, for instance, is a significant representative of those “moments of [national] crisis” that serve to position Arab Americans under an interrogative and suspicious light. The perpetuation of stigmatized views and the isolation of the whole community left it an open target for collective punishments after the World Trade Center attacks. Reducing the community to a handful of essentialist constructions and negative stereotypes helps conceal its complexity and diversity.

These terrorist attacks were no doubt a shock for the whole community as they represented the falling apart of Arab Americans’ attempts to integrate in American



society. This forcibly and even violently acquired visibility embodies a serious impediment to the hopes of many generations struggling hard to find a place for themselves in America. In this respect, Elie Chalala, the editor of *Al Jadid Journal*, explains the following:

It is useless to search for the right words to express the inexpressible pain that followed the horrible death of thousands... but there is another source of this pain: the severe blow that has been struck against the accomplishment made by Arab-Americans toward correcting centuries of stereotypes of both themselves and Arabs in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, this situation helped the vulnerable community realize the need to come together to defend themselves as well as their interests as American citizens. In addition to that, they are also faced with the necessity of defending their Arab heritage, and therefore, their identity as Arab Americans. This double burden they are confronted with does not seem to make it easy for Arab Americans in the United States. Moreover, this very idea of belonging is now at stake, which further complicates their task of protecting and defending their proclaimed hyphenated identity.

What is more, the increasing political focus on Arab Americans in the United States does not exactly reduce their invisibility, nor does it result in a more accurate understanding of their complex cultural, linguistic, or national make up. In this dissertation, I aim to shed light on this group that I consider to be part of the multicultural fabric in the United States, and therefore, linked to other ethnic groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, among others. Contemporary Arab American literature reflects, I believe, the community's quest to regain its own voice and achieve self-representation. Likewise, Arab American writers

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<sup>7</sup> Chalala, Elie. "Arab Americans after September 11<sup>th</sup> : Rethinking Ideas not Carved in Stone." *Al Jadid*, Vol. 7, N° 36, 2001.  
<<http://www.aljadid.com/editors/0736chalala.html>>

play the important role, through the themes they handle, in guiding the community in this quest to locate this communal hyphenated identity.

## **CHAPTER 2**



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORIZING CONTEMPORARY ARAB AMERICAN LITERATURE**

#### **2.1 Defining the Third Space**

Identity is constructed according to multiple discourses and ideologies at the same time, which means that one's subjectivity or identity is multiple. It is also "overdetermined," in the sense that it is not determined by only one discourse or ideology, but rather by innumerable ones. This concept goes back to the turn of the twentieth century among African American intellectuals such as Ralph Ellison, who argues that identity is forged rather than given, and created rather than determined by biology or social statistics.

This makes the individuals able to speak from any of their multiple subject positions, which allows this multiply-constructed subjecthood to provide infinite possibilities for what constitutes an identity. The idea of hybridity refers to a mixed location where subjects do not belong to any unified or stable positions. This concept, indeed, deconstructs and destabilizes any stable binary opposition or category, as the hybrid position constitutes a place where categories are crossed, and where a space between defined subject positions is created. From this position, Homi Bhabha starts to shed light on possible different perceptions of national identities and national boundaries. He disapproves of the definition of selfhood along ethnocentric notions referring to a supposedly unitary set of beliefs and practices. The scholar challenges these ethnocentric elements of selfhood and identity when he mentions dissident and dislocated voices belonging to individuals whose identities are excluded from these theoretically stable and fixed categories. He suggests that the identity of the migrant, for

instance, is as a kind of hybridity and thus a challenge to stable categories of national identity. Therefore, Bhabha claims

the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments of processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1994: 2)

Bhabha sheds light on what is implied in the naming of a critical theory as “Western,” a designation which conveys “institutional power and ideological Eurocentricity.” This Western-labeled critical theory arises from the colonial tradition of engaging “with texts within the familiar traditions and conditions of colonial anthropology either to universalize their meaning within its own cultural and academic discourse, or to sharpen its internal critique of the Western logocentric sign, the idealist subject, or indeed the illusions and delusions of civil society” (45). Bhabha calls it “a familiar manoeuvre of theoretical knowledge,” which while it “opened up the chasm of cultural difference,” rather tries to confine and contain this difference as well as its effects through the creation of “a mediator or a metaphor of otherness” to realize this purpose. This strategy of containment adopted by the knowledge of cultural difference makes of difference and otherness “the fantasy of a certain cultural space or, indeed, the certainty of a form of a theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological ‘edge’ of the West” (45-46). The Other is deprived of a real space where it can actively articulate its difference, as it is actually restricted to a powerless and passive presence. Hence, “the Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse” (46).

Taking into account the tension within critical theory “between its institutional containment and its revisionary force,” Bhabha doubts the ability of critical theory to

provide a balanced reference to other cultures, and consequently, it “cannot forever sustain its position in the academy as the adversarial cutting edge of Western idealism” (47). He suggests the creation of a “new territory of translation,” and therefore the modification of the politics of cultural domination. He draws a distinction between “cultural diversity” and what he terms “cultural difference,” an allusion to the term “différence/différance” so central to Post-Structuralist thinking. In this way, Bhabha perceives it as the play of difference, rather than pure distinction, between these two terms. If cultural diversity is an “object of empirical knowledge,” cultural difference is “the process of the enunciation of culture as knowledgeable, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification.” He remarks that while cultural diversity is a “category of comparative ethics, aesthetics, or ethnology,” cultural difference is a “process of signification through which statements of or on culture differentiate”. Furthermore, Bhabha states that

Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural “contents” and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity. Cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity (50).

On the other hand, and through the concept of cultural difference, he affirms that the “problem of the cultural interaction emerges only at the signifiatory boundaries of culture, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs misappropriated” (50). He argues, moreover, that this concept highlights “the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the *name* of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation” (51). Bhabha adds that “the enunciative process” of culture

introduces a split in the performative present of cultural identification; a split between the traditional culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference, and the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance (51).

Bhabha's aim in pointing out the *différance* between cultural diversity and cultural difference is to stress the need to rethink the traditional notions of cultural identity which have informed the process of decolonization – what Bhabha alludes to as an antagonistic view of “culture-as-political-struggle” (52) – and the concomitant growth of nationalism – what Bhabha terms “constant national principles” (52) – in the Post-colonial world. His point is that both these notions, although ostensibly radical, have, ironically, been derived from archaic and antagonistic notions of identity and cultural conflict which reached their apogee in nineteenth century Europe and which are predicated on a belief in the possibility of the purity of cultural identity, the organic notion that a given community is united by its common “roots,” and the possibility of “self-expression.” Bhabha offers instead a “critique of the positive aesthetic and political values we ascribe to the unity or totality of cultures, especially those that have known long and tyrannical histories of domination and misrecognition. Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other” (52).

Bhabha believes this to be true. He emphasizes that this is not because he believes in “some humanistic nostrum that beyond individual cultures we all belong to the human culture of mankind” (52). Rather, the “reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation – the place of an utterance – is crossed by the *différance* of writing” (52). In other words, influenced by the views of Émile Benveniste, Bhabha is arguing that identity, individually or en masse, is never pre-given: it must be enunciated. Moreover,



subjectivity is less the origin of any utterance about the self than its product, hence the reference to the “disjuncture between the subject of a proposition (énoncé) and the subject of enunciation” (53).

What is at stake in any attempt to articulate the identity of a culture is the “structure of symbolic representation” (52) itself, to be precise, the “‘différence’ in the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent” (53). However, Bhabha expands Derrida’s focus on langue to include Benveniste’s focus on ‘discourse’ or parole: he coins the term the “Third Space” (53) to denote the fact that the “production of meaning requires . . . both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious” (53). By the latter, Bhabha means the “discursive embeddedness and address [of the subject of enunciation], its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space” (53). The “intervention of the Third Space . . . makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process” (54) and “destroys this mirror of representation” (54) which we mistakenly equate to language.

The Third Space which informs any utterance consequently “challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People” (54), whether this be European or Post-colonial nations. The Third Space, which “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation” (55), “displaces the narrative of the Western [and indeed Post-colonial] nation which . . . [is] written in homogeneous, serial time” (54) by virtue of the “disruptive temporality of enunciation” (54). All “cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent

space of enunciation” (55) as a result of which “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable” (55). The discursive conditions of enunciation ensure “that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew” (55).

As a result, the bearers of a “hybrid identity” (55) are “caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation” (55) as a result of which they are “now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference” (55). Consequently, the “native intellectual who identifies the people with the ‘true national culture’ will be disappointed” (55). In short, the recognition of the “split-space of enunciation” (55) will open the way to “conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (55). To conclude, Bhabha says that

We should remember that it is the “inter”— the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the “people”. And by exploring this “Third Space”, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves (56).

The Third Space, therefore, is a way of framing the liminal which allows hybrid individuals to create a space where they can articulate their cultural difference. In this space, they are able to invent their own history and renew their past, “refiguring it as a contingent in-between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (7). Hence, Arab American literature is the very articulation of this idea, as its different phases display the different episodes the Arab American community has gone through during more than one century of presence in the United States of America. In

this dissertation, I am going to explore the negotiation of the Third Space in some contemporary Arab American novels.

## **2.2 Redefining the Third Space According to Contemporary Arab American Discourse:**

Contemporary Arab American academics have recently started to pay more attention to the legacy inherited by early Arab American writers who, as Layla Al Maleh expresses it, were “able to negotiate boundaries beyond the spaces of their birth-place, an in-dwelling contentment quite unlike the expressions of pain and agonizing dislocation that characterize postcolonial hybridity of late” (4).<sup>8</sup> Al Maleh uses R. Radhakrishnan’s terms to describe how these writers were “ensconced comfortably in the heartland of both national and transnational citizenship” (159).<sup>9</sup> She states that theirs was “a hybridity that undoubtedly helped them negotiate the ‘identity politics’ of their place of origin and their chosen abode with less tension than their successors” (4). In this context, I will trace the itinerary followed by contemporary Arab American writers to articulate hybridity and, therefore, negotiate the Third Space through their works.

In their efforts to carve a place for Arab American discourse within mainstream American literature and at the same time among minority literatures in the United States, contemporary Arab American writers seem to be aware of their cultural background, being “the descendents of a rich heritage, with a shared history, the wealth of a much-respected literature, and an esteemed language”. More importantly, they have the mission to

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<sup>8</sup> Al Maleh, Layla, ed. *Arab Voices in Diaspora*. Amsterdam: Rodopi B. V. , 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Radhakrishnan, R. *Diasporic Mediations*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

negotiate identities from a vantage-point with firm links to Arab history, even when they were second or third-generation writers. Indeed, much of what they wrote still reflected a warm relationship to the homeland despite the authors' geographical distance from it (Al Maleh, 12-13).

The vital growth of this emerging literature is helping Arab American writers in their attempts to regain their discourse as they “found ‘home’ and acceptance in ethnicity” (24). In this way, the work of most contemporary Arab American writers reflects a deep awareness of their hyphenated identity, and embodies an exploration of the spaces situated in each side of the hyphen. In addition to that, the treatment that Arab Americans have long suffered at the hands of the most part of mainstream America helped them realize the importance of exercising self-representation in order to achieve social, political and religious equality in the United States. In their effort to counteract being constantly received as “outsiders” since the end of the nineteenth century, they struggle to find themselves a significant place within American culture. For that purpose, literature becomes an important means to realize such self-representation, bringing to light the unheard stories and experiences of a community.

In the foreword of *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004), Barbara Nimri Aziz, journalist and founder of RAWI (Radius of Arab American Writers), points out that like other minority groups before, Arab American writers have come to realize the importance of the “write or be written” principle. She believes that “facing the sweet and bitter, tussling with disorder, hate, fear, is asserting our responsibility, a responsibility we once had left to others” (xii). Aziz argues that after decades of misrepresentations and “half truths,” Arab Americans “must decide what is really true and what is false, then negotiate those and add to this our own hidden experience” (xii). To illustrate her opinion, she mentions Toni Morrison

who once described writing as a process by which a person goes to a place and moves dirt in order to understand why he or she is there at all. All writers are

miners, sifting through the little things overlooked or abandoned or discolored by others. This is where Arab American writers are today, first going to the place and moving the dirt” (xiii).

Nimri highlights the importance of “minor details” in recreating and conveying the collective memory of Arab Americans as a minority group. She identifies these details as “the ‘little things’ we are able to identify and recover [from Arab American communal and individual histories],” making, therefore, a story more “poignant” and relative (xiii). The role played by Arab American literature in exposing these “little things,” according to Nimri, “may not overturn centuries of injustice, and it will not propel us into a position of dominance. But we can at least write our story... Writers cannot dispute. But we can locate ourselves at that archaeological site, and build new stories from the little things we reclaim” (xiii-xiv). The presence of these details from Arab American heritage in literary production not only serves to voice the Arab American experience to a mainstream audience, and therefore, humanize it, but also to enhance inter-community connections and help “rebuild a fragmented, uncertain identity” (xiii). In my opinion, Arab American writers have the task of helping the community locate and enjoy a communal hyphenated identity taking into account its complexity and varied features.

Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed static noun. It is a verb. He writes that cultural identity

is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being.’ It belongs to a future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. (225)

In this way, the unstable racial categorization of the Arab American community further problematizes the sense of belonging and identification among the members of this group. Most Arab American writers are definitely aware of the need to enhance their ties as a community in order to face vulnerability as well as invisibility. In this sense, these writers' focus on ethnicity embodies an act of proclamation of hybridity as the essence of an Arab American identity being an exclusive part of the mosaic of ethnic America. They try to straddle both sides of the hyphen through validating their American identity and their Arab origin.

This double consciousness – a term coined by the African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois – leads Arab American writers to more and more address issues pertaining to their own experiences. For this reason, we can find a multitude of novels and memoirs holding strong connections with the Arab homeland, and whose titles invoke these links, such as Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (1997), Elmaz Abinader's *The Children of Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon* (1991), Mohja Kahf's *The girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), Samia Serageldine's *Cairo House* (2000), Laila Halaby's *The West of the Jordan* (2003), and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993), *Crescent* (2003) and *The Language of Baklava* (2005), among others.

From my point of view, this cultural affinity with the Old World reminds of Wilson Harris's concept of "architectonic fossil spaces" (2).<sup>10</sup> Harris refers to the French biologist Jacques Monod, who states that "every living being is also a fossil. Within it, all the way down to the microscopic structure of its proteins, it bears the traces if not the stigmata of its ancestry" (160). Harris agrees with Monod as he highlights the importance of the past and/or ancestry in the construction of one's

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<sup>10</sup> Harris, Wilson. *Fossil and Psyche*. Austin: Occasional Publication African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 1974.

identity, as everybody carries within oneself the floating fossil identities that dominate the psyche. He argues that one could awaken these lethargic fossils through an expedition into the past, which is to perform a productive dialogue with this heritage. This implies the importance of the way we approach the past and cultural origins because a constructive process can be adopted in order to unleash the possibilities of creativity and progress. This fruitful process allows the creation of a meeting point, that is to say, a Third Space, gathering different spaces in a constant dialogue and negotiation. In fact, contemporary Arab American literature embodies this process as these writers deal with the question of hybridity and the doubling of significance in their characters' search for an in-between space where they can make possible this identity negotiation.

Arab American literature is undoubtedly a growing field of ethnic American literature, which explains these writers' identification with other ethnic groups. In this context, Andrea Shalal-Esa asserts that Arab American writers "are consciously building bridges to other communities of color... They are wielding their pens to chronicle decades of racism, oppression and marginalization in the United States, and to begin uncovering the particularities of their own ethnic histories."<sup>11</sup> In this way, Lisa Suhair Majaj highlights the importance of extending cross-cultural lines for Arab American literature. She argues that

The question of how to establish connections and coalitions across ethnic boundaries is of increasing importance within Arab-American discourse. Given the marginalization of Arab Americans within American culture and the on-going reality of anti-Arab discrimination and violence, the need to focus on protecting and strengthening Arab Americans as a group remains strong. However, it is also increasingly clear that ethnic identity cannot be constructed in isolation. (1999: 325)

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<sup>11</sup> Shalal-Esa, Andrea. "Arab American Writers Identify With Communities of Color". *Al Jadid Magazine*, Vol. 9, Nos. 42/43 (Winter/Spring 2003)  
<<http://www.aljadid.com/content/arab-american-writers-identify-communities-color>>

For Arab American writers, therefore, the proclamation of hybridity and speaking out from the ranks of the minority goes hand in hand with fomenting a coalition with other people of color in the United States.

We can find the traces of such identification with other minority groups in the famous poem entitled “Sand Nigger,” from the poetry collection *Curriculum Vitae* (1988) by the Arab American poet and attorney Lawrence Joseph. Born in Detroit in 1948, he was the grandchild of Lebanese and Syrian Catholic immigrants. Lisa Suhair Majaj states that Joseph was “one of the first [Arab American] writers to bring racial categories in relation to Arab-American experience to the foreground.”<sup>12</sup> In this poem, Joseph addresses the color line saying,

“Sand nigger,” I’m called,  
and the name fits: I am  
the light-skinned nigger  
with black eyes and the look  
difficult to figure--a look  
of indifference, a look to kill—  
a Levantine nigger  
in the city of the strait  
between the great lakes Erie and St. Clair  
which has a reputation  
for violence, an enthusiastically  
bad-tempered sand nigger  
who waves his hands, nice enough  
to pass, Lebanese enough (29).

While he acknowledges his Lebanese roots, Joseph constructs an identity negotiation through the use of common stereotypes about Arabs. His appropriation of such a derogatory label as “sand nigger” makes him aware of his own ethnic identity, and consequently, he somehow accepts this marginalization forced on him and his community. He even claims that the Arab American experience should be placed in its American context of black-white tension. Therefore, Joseph identifies with other groups

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<sup>12</sup> Majaj, Lisa Suhair. “Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments.” *American Studies journal*. Number 52. 2008. 29 June 2009.  
<<http://www.asjournal.org/archive/52/150.html>>



equally labeled whether along racial or religious or even economic lines by mainstream America, and in this way, he celebrates interracial solidarity among these marginalized communities.

The work of the prominent Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad embodies this approach as well. Born in Jordan to Palestinian refugee parents in 1973, she moved to the States at the age of five. She grew up in a racially diverse neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, among Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Dominicans, etc. This multiethnic background strengthened her will to cross ethnic and religious lines, which illustrates her solidarity and union as well as identification with globally disfranchised people of color. In an interview with Nathalie Handal, Hammad says that she remembers “the first time I wrapped my hair in a gele, an African head wrap. Using material from Senegal, I wanted to wrap myself in the beauty of sisterhood. The ancestors remembered my name and whispered it to me under the material.”<sup>13</sup> Hammad’s first poetry collection entitled *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996) voices this sense of solidarity as well as the poet’s political and humanitarian activism through her concern with thematic parallels between the experience of African Americans and that of Palestinians. In the poem entitled “open poem to those who rather we not read... or breathe,” she says:

we      children of children exiled from the homelands  
descendents of immigrants denied jobs and toilets  
carry continents in our eyes  
survivors of the Middle Passage  
we      stand  
and demand recognition of our humanity  
starving for education  
we feed on the love of our people (73)

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<sup>13</sup> Handal, Nathalie. “Drops of Suheir Hammad: A Talk with a Palestinian Poet Born Black.”  
*Al Jadid Magazine*, Vol 3, N° 20 (Summer 1997)  
<<http://www.aljadid.com/content/drops-suheir-hammad-talk-palestinian-poet-born-black>>

Hammad makes use of a collective “we” which seems to be an affirmation of a shared interracial alliance. According to Carol Fadda-Conrey, this poem testifies to “a collective past fraught with subjugation and discrimination (extending to the present),” and reaffirms that Hammad’s “own Palestinian history of exile cannot be disengaged from the larger history of imperialism and colonialism that scatter peoples across the world and sever them from their homelands, whether they are exiles, immigrants, or descendents of slave-trade victims” (2007: 165).

Hammad is considered to be one of the first Arab American writers to venture into American vernacular literature, as she incorporates Arabic dialect with English in many of her poems. Her choice of the performance poetry genre allows her to experiment and innovate the language used. For instance, in the poem entitled “dedication” from *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, the poet writes the following:

his heart transcends his body	
he vowed to return to phalasteen	
<i>bil roh</i>	<i>bil dem</i>
with his life	with his blood (22)

Here, the vernacular stands out in italics along with the corresponding translation in English. In this poem, Hammad transliterates the Arabic words according to the exact dialect pronunciation specific to Palestine. Furthermore, as an accomplished spoken word performer, she took part in the 2003 Tony award-winning Broadway show and HBO series hip hop “Def Poetry Jam on Broadway,” which makes her work live not only on the page but on the stage as well. Hammad’s performance poetry, therefore, attracts an audience from a variety of cultures and backgrounds due to the wide range of topics she addresses in her work. But most importantly, perhaps, Arab Americans find in Hammad’s poetry the language of the Old country that they grew up with intertwined with the language of their adopted home.

The search for home remains one of the recurring themes in contemporary Arab American narrative. Randa Jarrar's coming-of-age novel entitled *A Map of Home* (2008) is praised for its uniqueness, as it is "unlike anything that has been published before it by Arab American writers." This novel is "by turns and sometimes all at once funny, moving, lewd, introspective, crass, sarcastic, witty, crude, and sincere" (Salaita: 2011, 130). The novel chronicles the story of the protagonist and narrator Nidali Ammar from birth to college. From the beginning, we learn that everything about Nidali is different, starting from the story of her birth and her very name. Assuming she was a boy, her father Waheed proceeds to name her Nidal for "struggle," as "he'd always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was tucked safely in Mama's uterus" (Jarrar 2008: 3). As soon as he realizes his mistake, he corrects the name adding an "i" to make it possessive, meaning "my struggle," which the mother Fairuza does not appreciate, and so the reader witnesses a scene of a loud but at the same time humorous argument between the parents. Fairuza screams at Waheed saying, "I'm changing the girl's name right this instant! First you give her a stock boy's name, as though she's ready to be a struggler or a diaper-warrior, then you add a letter and think it's goddamn unique" (6).

As Steven Salaita states, "the scene of Nidali's birth sets the novel's tone, including as it does a vicious yet humorous fight between her parents, replete with colorful language, and a narrative that oscillates between serious and lighthearted" (2011: 131). Just like Jarrar, Nidali was born in the United States to a Palestinian father and a Greek-Egyptian mother. The Palestinian element plays a dominant role in Nidali's sense of identity and belonging. According to her, "Baba said that moving was part of being Palestinian. 'Our people carry the homeland in their souls,' he would tell me at night as he tucked me in. This was my bedtime story when I was three, four. 'You can go wherever you want, but you'll always have it in your heart'" (Jarrar 2008: 9). Nidali,

indeed, personifies this nomadic identity as she moves from Boston to Kuwait where she grows up, and then her family flees to Alexandria, Egypt, during the first Gulf War, and finally she moves back to the United States when she is in high school. Nidali's coming-of-age experience, therefore, carries the moral and social adventures she undertakes in her passage through a number of countries and cultures, and whose impact is essential to the forging of the girl's personality and identity forging, and at the same time, to her awareness of the instability of belonging.

This instability can be detected in one of the tender moments between Nidali and Waheed. She draws a map of Palestine from memory, shows it to him, and asks, "Is that right?" "Who knows," he said, waving his hand dismissively" (192). At her insistence, he says, "There's no telling where home starts and where it ends." Then, Nidali notices that her father's "eyes were filled with tears" (193). The shadow of Palestine as an absent home appears again through this question of maps, referring to the continuously changing aspect of the boundaries separating Israel from the Palestinian occupied territories. Jarrar addresses a political issue concerning the dynamic and unstable features of the Palestinian map, in particular, and which is being constantly reduced as a consequence of Israeli colonization. In this context, Salaita states that "this instability is commensurate with the complicated lives of the Ammar family, whose members must constantly redraw maps to itinerant homes" (2011: 134). Hence, in this atmosphere of homelessness and cultural transplantation, Nidali tries to find a place for herself in the world through by aiming to have her own voice, to become a writer.

The Lebanese American writer and painter Rabih Alameddine also explores in his work the sense of home and/or the homeland in the culturally hybrid experiences of his Arab American characters. Born in Jordan in 1959 to Lebanese Druze parents, he

grew up in Kuwait and Lebanon until the age of 17, when he moved to England and then to California. Author of *Koolaid's* (1999), *The Prev* (1999), *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001), and *The Hakawati* (2008), Alameddine works on multilocal stories and characters situated on two sides of the world, i.e. the Middle East and America. The images that his works convey of the homeland, in this case Lebanon, are related to “war, disease, rape, and insanity, all equally dispersed in his novels to reflect an historical era that is devoid of moral form or meaning” (Al Maleh, 36). This embodies a tendency that has marked much of the emerging body of Arab American writing from the 1990’s onwards, consisting of “de-mythologizing the homeland” (Shakir: 2003, 23), and which I intend to address in the next chapter.

*I, the Divine* (2001) is a complete novel which technically never moves beyond the first chapter. It is a fragmented narrative attempting to reconstruct the life of an Arab American woman, Sarah Nour El-Din. The novel carries a collection of the protagonists’ failed and fragmented attempts to write a novel and a memoir, since she is unable to put together all the pieces of the story of her life. That is why she only manages to write the first chapters of her memoirs. Depicting exilic and diasporic Arab American identities, the novel stresses contemporary transnational connections based rather on the critical and complex relation with the homeland. Alameddine focuses on the diasporic experience of Sarah who, born and raised in Beirut to a Lebanese father and an American mother, witnesses a part of the Lebanese civil war before she moves to the America at the age of twenty. After falling in love with Omar, both of them decide to rebel against her Druze family and his Greek Orthodox parents, and elope to New York where Sarah gives birth to their son. When Omar decides to go back to Lebanon, she divorces him and stays in New York without her child.

Sarah spends her time constantly going back and forth between the U.S. and Lebanon, which constitutes an ongoing process of physical and ideological negotiation of both cultures. Through Sarah's story, the novelist addresses personal dislocation as it is displayed in the following extract: "Can there be any *here*? No. She understands *there*. Whenever she is in Beirut, home is in New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is but where she is not" (Alameddine 2001: 99). Sarah feels displaced in both "homes" as she does not belong completely in either of them. Thanks to this transnational standpoint, the protagonist is given a space where she probes cultural questions and performs this negotiation process in order to reach to self-understanding.

The novel problematizes national and cultural belonging as the protagonist's suspension between the two nations makes her constant border-crossing fluid and flexible. This position facilitates the articulation of Sarah's in-between identities because she is able to examine and evaluate both backgrounds from a critical perspective. Therefore, Sarah's fragmented narrative is a reflection of her fragmented heterogeneous background as her rebellion against her Lebanese family, clan and principles leads her to try hard to adopt her newfound American individuality. She says: "I hated Umm Kalthoum.<sup>14</sup> I wanted to identify only with my American half. I wanted to be special. I could not envision how to be Lebanese and keep any sense of individuality" (229). Here she exposes her binary sense of belonging, identifying America with individualism and independence, and Lebanon with community and collectivity. She continues:

I have been blessed with many curses in my life, not the least of which was being born half Lebanese and half American. Throughout my life, these contradictory parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a

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<sup>14</sup> Umm Kalthoum (1898-1975) was an outstanding Egyptian singer. Known as "Kawkab al-Sharq" (Star of the East), she was one of the most famous Arab singers, and she is still considered the greatest female Arab singer in history.

satisfactory conclusion. I shuffled ad nauseam between the need to assert my individuality and the need to belong to my clan, being terrified of loneliness and terrorized of losing myself to relationships. (229)

Sarah does not make clear which component of her fractured self is the burden, but most importantly she comes to recognize that this inner conflict is the consequence of her attempts to separate individuality and clan. Then she wonders, “have I begun to realize that like my city, my American patina covers an Arab soul?” (229).

Hence, Sarah gradually comes to realize that what she really needs is a combination of individuality and family affection, which helps her come to terms with her family in which she displays her pride in the closing of the final chapter:

I have tried to write my memoir by telling an imaginary reader to listen to my story. Come learn about me, I said. But how can I expect readers to know who I am if I do not tell them about my family, my friends, the relationships in my life? Who am I if not where I fit in the world, where I fit in the lives of the people dear to me? I have to explain how the individual participated in the larger organism to show how I fit into this larger whole. So instead of telling the reader, Come meet me, I have to say something else.  
Come meet my family.  
Come meet my friends.  
Come here I say.  
Come meet my pride (308).

Sarah, then, realizes that she cannot continue her desperate attempt to escape from her clan among whom she seems to find a place for herself, and finally coming to terms with her multiple fragmented selves and countries.

Alameddine’s particular approach to Arab American hybridity in *I, the Divine* (2001) is certainly so interesting and worth close attention because he offers the reader as well as the critic a work of fiction that is totally innovative and experimental both in form and content. However, in this dissertation my focus will be on the analysis of the writings of two prominent female Arab American writers, Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby. My choice is due to my admiration of and special attraction towards these two

writers, which takes me back to my first steps along the path of Arab America about ten years ago.

Before starting the writing of my dissertation for the degree of Diploma de Estudios Avanzados, I knew from the beginning that I wanted to work on ethnic literatures in the United States, and I had a special inclination towards Chicana writing in particular. In those days, I had the opportunity to read Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), and I remember that I admired the little Esperanza Cordero and her dreams and efforts to have a better life out of her Latino barrio while keeping the promise to come back for the ones she leaves behind. I was so moved by the teenager's search for her identity and by the stories of all the other women surrounding her that I was about to take the decision to make the novel the subject of my research. However, a voice inside me was shouting the word "Arab," so I started wondering about the existence of any American author with Arab origins writing about their experience. So I immediately started a quick search into this possibility, and there she was: Diana Abu-Jaber and her novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993). And this was the start of my long journey with Arab American literature.

Within the perspective of contemporary Arab American literature, the choice of Abu-Jaber's first novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993) as one of the objects of my study seemed almost obvious, since it was received and hailed as a "landmark work in the Arab American tradition, not unlike Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in that of Native America" (Salaita 2001: 424). It was the first Arab American novel to reach a large mainstream American readership, and become, in a way I will explore later, a cornerstone of a heated debate about the construction and critical portrayal of a contemporary Arab American identity. Its winning of the Oregon Book Award and the fact that it was shortlisted for the Pen/Hemingway Award in 1994 was considered a



breakthrough in the latent and obscured tradition of Arab writing in America, at a moment when public discourse about the Middle East and American policy in the area had initiated the course of maximum visibility we are witnessing at the present moment.

Abu-Jaber herself seems to embody in her biographical circumstances the hyphenated experience which marks ethnic narratives in the United States. Born of a mixed heritage, she makes hybridity the center of *Arabian Jazz*'s narrative discourse. Many of her basic motives can be traced back, however discontinuously, to her double heritage. She was born in 1959 to a Jordanian immigrant father – himself of a mixed heritage, with a Bedouin Jordanian father and a Palestinian mother – and an American mother from Irish-German stock.

Abu-Jaber's childhood was spent in a typical American middle-class environment, since the family had settled in the small town of Euclid, outside of Syracuse, New York. When she was seven, her family, her parents and two younger sisters, moved to Amman, Jordan, where they "spent some time living among courtyards and trellised jasmine and extended family" (Abu-Jaber 2004: 122), giving her an experience of dis-location or displacement. Two years later, they returned to America to settle down again in Syracuse. Abu-Jaber reveals the transmission through paternal authority of the experience of duality, as she writes the following:

My father could not make up his mind about which country we should live in. In America, he constantly reminded us that we were good Arab girls; we weren't allowed to go out to parties or school dances. But then he encouraged us to study single-mindedly, to compete as intensely as any boy, and to always make our own way in the world. (122)

Following her father's will, Abu-Jaber received her undergraduate degree from the State University of New York-Oswego, as one of her uncles taught there so he could keep an eye on her while she lived in a dormitory. The initial experience of freedom that university provides was to be constantly tutored and monitored so as to preserve a set of

paternal homeland values. She earned her PhD in English and Creative Writing from the University of Binghamton. She taught English and creative writing at the University of Michigan, the University of Oregon and the University of Miami. She has been teaching at Portland University since 1996 and divides her time between Portland and Miami.

Abu-Jaber is almost a born writer as she started writing when she was at school. The indebtedness to the paternal figure seems to be at work even here, at the onset of her writing career. In her own words, it seems that the eastern tradition of orality as exemplified in her father's storytelling when she was a child and adolescent fostered her hunger for her own storytelling. When she was a postgraduate student at SUNY-Binghamton, she started writing her first published short stories while finding her own voice. There she worked with the American novelist and literary critic John Gardner, who encouraged her to find her themes and voice within her double heritage.

In one of her articles published online, Diana Abu-Jaber talks about the impact of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) on her when she first read it while she was still at high school. She recalls her fascination at how "the story traces the links of what it's like for those of us who live between identities." Abu-Jaber writes that she "was a stranger everywhere, neither fully Arab nor fully American. Hong Kingston understood this strangeness." While reading the novel, Abu-Jaber "felt an electrifying jolt of recognition. This was the desire of a young girl for a voice, a sense of her own power." She adds that this novel was her "first inkling that there were many kinds of stories in the house of literature,"<sup>15</sup> as thanks to Hong Kingston she learnt about negotiating identities and hyphenated characters like herself.

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<sup>15</sup> Abu-Jaber, Diana. "Seizing Power from *The Woman Warrior*. NPR (June 2007)  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11163242>

Abu-Jaber's finding of her own hybrid voice in the autobiographical experience of a mixed Arab American background determines the basic thematic concern of her first two novels *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and *Crescent* (2003), and her memoir entitled *The Language of Baklava* (2005), showing a progressive problematization of the issues she addresses. Here I intend to concentrate on these two novels, as Abu-Jaber's later works do not embrace an Arab American perspective. In fact, she has gone mainstream with her last two novels, *Origin* (2007) and *Birds of Paradise* (2011). However, I think that despite this move towards other perspectives, she remains one of the prominent Arab American voices whose work has notably contributed to the Arab American narrative.

Laila Halaby was the second writer I discovered in the Arab American literary tradition. I remember the day I received the delivery of my online order of her novel *West of the Jordan* (2003). When I opened the box, I was startled by the cover photo which was like a reflection of myself years ago. The huge kohl made-up eyes of the girl on the cover were disturbingly similar to mine, which increased my expectations about the book. In an interview published in *The Tucson Weekly*, Halaby mentions that the girl on the cover is "a Palestinian who lives in Brooklyn whose image was part of an article in a Saudi publication about Arabs in the States." She adds, "I don't know her personally, but she conveys something akin to what my characters are going through. It's the duality, the conflict of her very Arab-looking countenance, but she's wearing a T-shirt, an American shirt."<sup>16</sup>

I admired the writer's poetic prose and the freshness of the characters and their stories which reflect Halaby's own experience. Born in Beirut to a Palestinian Jordanian father and an American mother, Halaby moved to the United States in the late 1960's when she was still a baby. While her father remained in the old country, she was

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<sup>16</sup> Schuman, Joan. "Pick." *The Tucson Weekly*. (22 May 2003)  
<http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/pick/Content?oid=1072358>

brought up by her mother in Tucson, Arizona. This did not prevent her from being immersed in both cultures, as she explains in an online interview published in the Magazine of Washington University in Saint Louis: “From the time I was in high school many of my friends were Arab... it was always a large part of my life. It was as though I were two different people.”<sup>17</sup>

About twenty-five years later, she returned to Jordan where she spent a year studying folklore on a Fulbright scholarship. During her stay, she had the opportunity to get access to Palestinian refugee camps, where she worked in schools. Her direct contact with Palestinian children allowed her to witness their life in the camps and also collect their tales. In this same interview, she indicates her interest in giving voice to these kids as “Palestinian children in refugee camps are not voices you hear often,” which is why “I really want to introduce those voices to American children.” This trip, in fact, provided Halaby with an important source of inspiration for her debut novel *West of the Jordan* (2003), which won the prestigious PEN Beyond Margins Award.

Back in the United States, she earned two master’s degrees, one in Arabic languages and literatures at the University of California, and the other in counseling at Loyola Marymount University. She is fluent in Arabic, Italian and Spanish. In 2013, she started teaching a creative writing class to veterans in the polytrauma unit at Southern Arizona VA Healthcare System. She combines her writing with her work as a counselor coaching smokers from different cultural backgrounds who are trying to quit tobacco. Halaby explains that counseling is suitable for her, as she listens to people’s stories all day, which is actually compatible with her writing. Identity enjoys a privileged position in her work as it reflects her own experience of navigating between two cultures. Halaby, indeed, describes herself in her Twitter account biography as a “non-

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<sup>17</sup> Rogers, Betsy. “Storyteller Shares Tales of Duality.” *The Washington University in Saint Louis Magazine*. (Summer 2005).  
<http://magazine-archives.wustl.edu/summer05/AlumniProfiles.htm>

hyphenated” author, because she considers herself both Arab and American. Living a cultural duality herself helps her mine this in-betweenness in her writings, whether in the novels *West of the Jordan* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2008), or the poetry collection *My Name on his Tongue* (2012).

I think that Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby are prominent representatives of a generation of Arab American writers who have been trying hard to create and develop a space of their own within ethnic literatures in the United States. Their work undercuts the mainstream preconceived notions of what constitutes Arab American subjectivity, thus creating their own versions of individual and collective Arab American identities. The wide range of characters and stories with varied backgrounds they display, offers a perfect stage for the negotiation of the Third Space in the Arab American context. My analysis of their novels intends to show how they deconstruct essentialized frameworks of identity through the construction of an antiessentialist Arab American subjectivity rooted in the Arab American experience. This unstable subjectivity is definitely complex and multilayered, which makes the exploration of such works an exquisite critical exercise.



## **CHAPTER 3**





## CHAPTER 3

### **THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE ARAB AMERICAN IDENTITIES AND THE NARRATIVES OF DISPLACEMENT IN *ARABIAN JAZZ* BY DIANA ABU-JABER AND *WEST OF THE JORDAN* BY LAILA HALABY**

This chapter will be dedicated to the study of the novels *Arabian Jazz* and *West of the Jordan* that I consider to be narratives of displacement. My aim is to observe the identification options that both writers Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby offer to their Arab American female characters. Hence, I will explore the multilayered Arab American female identities and the negotiation processes experienced by the novels' characters.

#### **3.1 *Arabian Jazz***

##### **3.1.1 Fragile and displaced female Arab American identities in the making: The poor white community entourage and the absence of the mother figure**

From its very title, *Arabian Jazz* (1993) – Jazz being the quintessential American popular expression of a marginal culture achieving mainstream “high culture” appropriation – the novel posits itself in a double tradition of hyphenation and hybridity in its portrayal of the struggle of a Jordanian American family to find its place in the American setting of upstate New York. A small poor white community with its corresponding gallery of characters, all of them at odds with the central American discourse of progress and happiness, provides a frame into which Abu-Jaber settles her portrait of fragile and displaced female Arab American identities in the making.

Abu-Jaber situates her narrative in a poor white neighborhood, on the one hand, to focus on the way this small white community perceives values and differences; and on the other, to suggest the significance of growing up and attaining one's identity in this particular framework, taking into account that identity is constructed out of a dual process of identification with, and resistance to, some given models. The town of Euclid offers a setting where Abu-Jaber tries to open the debate on the negotiation of an Arab American identity as her characters try to find their own Third Space in this framework. Euclid becomes the home of a transplanted Jordanian American family, the Ramouds, consisting of Matussem, the Jordanian father, and his two daughters Jemurah (Jem) and Melvina (Melvie): "Euclid, New York, was virtually the same as it had been one hundred years ago when two roads intersected and that point was named" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 88).

Euclid is introduced as an isolated piece of land cut off from the world. This forgotten town, suffering stagnation and paralysis, is inhabited by a poor and immobile community.

Without the mall, Euclid remained an amoeba of a town... It took in dirt farmers, onion farmers, and junk dealers and produced poorly clothed and poorly fed children who'd wait for driver's licenses then leave in rotting-out Chevies, going as far as a case of Black Label would take them. Usually just far enough for them to come back for good. (90)

Abu-Jaber takes the reader for a ride in Jem's school bus as she describes the itinerary followed by the bus, and the different stops made across the countryside to pick up this poor community's children. In one of these stops, for instance,

[a] band of seven boys, ranging from around ten to eighteen, emerged from the defunct bus, crossed the lot, and climbed onto the school bus. Jem noticed a clothesline loaded with diapers. The Broom kids looked savage. Their faces were sharp and blank, branded with grime. Jem felt heat rising from their hands, their mouths, the way they ran, banding down to sit in the bus. (91-92)

The writer is revealing the ugly image of poverty personified by these children, which indicates her concern about this forgotten community as well as her critique of some social attitudes among this particular group. Moreover, she provides us with a glimpse of the fate of those children on the bus who had made Jem's life impossible in her school days: "As Jem moved toward graduation and college, her tormentors scattered. The kids on the bus dropped out or got pregnant, went to juvenile homes, foster homes, penitentiaries, turned up poverty-stricken, welfare-broken, sick, crazy, or drunk... those children that nobody wanted" (93-4).

This marginalized community with closed horizons contains working-class white characters who are portrayed as poor, semi-literate, ignorant, provincial, violent and hostile to foreigners. Abu-Jaber portrays some aspects of rural America where many families cannot properly raise their children, who are left to live in the wilderness with no hope of a better future. This atmosphere reminds the reader of an old tradition of American literature: the small countryside sub-genre going back to the early twentieth century with American writers like William Faulkner or Sherwood Anderson, for instance, whose fiction makes a dark psychological exposé of sharecroppers and poor white communities who dominated the lower ranks of the social structures of their fictional southern towns. Works like *Go Down Moses* (1942) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) chart the decay of the traditional South through the portrayal of the disturbed psyches and the dysfunctional relations between the members of some chaotic and disintegrating clans.

*Arabian Jazz* (2003) displays the frustrated hopes of the locals trapped within the labyrinth of Euclid: "'No one ever escapes this place,' Peachy Otts told Jem when they were children. 'You want to think twice about moving here. It's like that show – *The Twilight Zone*?'" (90). Peachy was Jemora's schoolmate who belongs to one of

the Ramouds' neighboring families. The Otts family leads a marginalized lifestyle devoid of any kind of ambition or hope. This family's life seems to be frozen in time, as there is no sign of progress or change. Peachy's sisters Gladys and Dolores, for instance, "looked haggard as old warriors, harrowed by poverty and pregnancy" (94-95). Dolores had her first child at the age of twelve. Now that she is thirty, she has at least five kids:

She'd turned herself over so many times to that damn man, *that damn man* being many men, forty, maybe fifty, or even a hundred. Who was counting? It didn't matter, they were all the same, parading around with their dicks like trophies, and nearly every one put a baby in her. (101-02)

This aspect of Dolores's character slightly recalls Caddy Compson from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the female character distinguished by her potent sexual presence, and who turns to unorthodox behavior in an attempt to assert her own independence and individuality. While Dolores's behavior may be related to poverty and marginality, Caddy uses her sexuality as an action to reject the false pride of her disintegrating family. She confides to her brother Quentin that she does not feel any pleasure or satisfaction from her sexual relations. On the other hand, she comes to associate sexual encounters with death: "When they touched me I died" (Faulkner 1954: 185).

The idea of death seems to bring both characters together again as their situation suggests that sexual desire is a corrupting or even destructive force. More importantly perhaps, in both cases pregnancy implies self-destruction and even death. Fascinated by Dalton Ames, Caddy starts a relationship with him and quickly becomes pregnant. While Caddy's pregnancy is a death knell to her family, Dolores's attempt to have an abortion when she is not pregnant causes her own death. Dolores dies when she is still wondering "when her life would begin: she hadn't seen any signs of it yet" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 175). In fact, she spends her days watching television and shouting at her

uncertain number of kids, which leads her to give voice to her despair through the reflection: “*Live by garbage, die by garbage*” (175).

This reflection proves to be true as it best describes the precarious conditions in which Dolores and her family live, to the point that her only worry on her deathbed is, curiously, the future of her younger sister Peachy. She expresses her concern about her sister by wishing her to go to college and, therefore, have a better fate than hers. That way, she would at least be able to achieve the dream of leaving Euclid and getting into the stream of the American dream that seems to have bypassed this community. The writer uses this group in order to express her concern about some poor rural areas in America which produce ill-fed, unhealthy, badly-dressed and dirty kids whose fate is harsh and grim. In addition to that, she criticizes some social attitudes exemplified in these characters, hence her concern about Dolores and her peers whose lives are reduced to getting pregnant in such poverty-stricken areas. Abu-Jaber draws attention to the conditions lived in by these women who waste their lives being with men who make them pregnant and then just leave. This casualness about producing babies without taking into account whether they can afford to bring them up properly or not is further displayed when Gil, in love with Jem, tries to convince her to marry him assuring her that “we’ll make babies and live in your father’s attic” (127).

In this way, Abu-Jaber creates a fully American setting which, in principle, could act as the central discourse towards which or against which Arab American identity is to be tested. This setting acts as a force of marginalization within the standards of American values – in this context the ordeal of the two young female characters eschews an easy disjunction of the either–or Arab/American – to become a form of multi and problematic identification. This small community with restricted opportunities due, fundamentally, to poverty and lack of expectations, engenders a very

characteristic isolation which leads its members to retreat into their own values. It acts as an alienating frame which duplicates the schizophrenic identity of the young female protagonists, problematizing a step further the difficulties of maladjustment and double identity.

In addition to that, the family's moving to Euclid is directly connected to the mother's death, after which Matussem decides to choose this town as a new home for his family instead of Syracuse, where they have been living until then. This can be considered another unsettling element because the loss of Nora, the mother, is linked to the loss of what the girls until that moment have regarded as home. On the other hand, the father's decision comes down to his desire to settle down somewhere and consequently to bring to an end the nomadic tradition of his Bedouin family.

And Euclid, lost to the rest of the world, was Matussem's private land, like the country his parents tried to leave as they made lives in Jordan, as they let go of their children's memories and let them grow up as Jordanian. Matussem was only two when the family left Nazareth. Still he knew there had been a Palestine for his parents; its sky formed a ceiling in his sleep. He dreamed of the country that had been, that he was always returning to in his mind.

After they'd moved to Euclid, he found there were ways to lose himself in a place. Euclid, my displaced past, he thought when he walked the gravel roads, past shacks and barking dogs. When he first saw Euclid he remembered it, every silver leaf and broken-backed creek. Nora was his history; now only the land was left. (260)

Euclid is portrayed as Matussem's new home, and particularly, as his private Palestine that his parents once left behind for Jordan and never had the possibility to go back to. This extract reflects the writer's exploration of the dispossession experience when she compares Matussem's dream of making a home in the United States with his parents' dream of making home in Jordan. For him, Palestine as a country and a land is lost for good, but its memories, history and significance remain in his heart and mind, which is why he chooses Euclid to become his own land. Therefore, this town is the land left for

him after Nora's death. Unlike Palestine, in this case Euclid as a land is still here but its history—which is Nora—is lost.

Accordingly, the patterns of psychic identification of Matussem's daughters are problematized not only by the question of the double cultural identity but also by the early experience of loss of the mother figure and the consequent displacement of the imaginary, as well. While at the same time, the force of the father figure, with its consequent psychic impact in the forging of an identity, works within a cultural atmosphere and values – those of the small American community – which are totally alien to him. This setting provides a hostile environment where Jem and Melvie have experienced rejection since an early age.

The death of the girls' Irish American mother Nora of typhus, while on a visit to Jordan, has been a turning point in the relation of the Ramouds with Nora's parents. Once in the airport, they are received with the grandmother's accusations to Matussem, “‘you killed her. You. You killed her. You. You killed...’ His daughter's hand in his was iron hot.” The grandparents' reaction suggests that they see the girls as accomplices in their mother's death. It seems that,

[Matussem's] in-laws never forgave him. Although they called the girls on birthdays and holidays, they wouldn't see them in person. “It hurts so much,” his mother-in-law had said to Jem, “to see so much of our daughter mixed up with the body of her murderer.” (85)

Like Matussem, the children know that one half of them is Arab, and the grandparents identify that half as the murdering half. This irrational identification of their Arab side as the murdering side ties in with their own sense of themselves as Arabs in America. They have to put up with the grandparents' accusation that, if Nora, an Irish American, had not married an Arab, she would never have died of typhus during that visit to Jordan.

The grandparents' rejection implies denial, which suggests dispossessing their granddaughters of their American half. Consequently, Jemorah and Melvina are reduced to the status of foreignness, together with their father. As foreigners, they become the subject of hostility and hatred. In this respect, Julia Kristeva describes the experience of hatred as "the way the foreigner often expresses his life." She writes,

Constantly feeling the hatred of others, knowing no other environment than that hatred... Like a child that hides, fearful and guilty, convinced beforehand that it deserves its parents' anger. In the world of dodges and shams that make up his pseudo-relationships with pseudo-others, hatred provides the foreigner with consistency. Against that wall, painful but certain, and in that sense familiar, he knocks himself in order to assert, to others and to himself, that he is here. (Kristeva 13)

The death of Nora, therefore, has engendered her parents' resentment, and consequently the Ramouds are doomed to face rejection as well as hatred within their own family sphere.

Rejection and hatred seem to have helped shape the girls' consciousness about their difference since their childhood. Their physical aspect accentuates this difference, as they "looked so alike, their skin the same pale shimmer of olive, the same glints of blue in their hair" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 31). In one of the flashbacks to Jemorah's childhood, we learn that her Arab features have provoked the hostility of children in the school bus. They

taunted Jem because of her strange name, her darker skin... She remembered the sensation of their hands on her body as they teased her, a rippling hatred running over her arms, legs, through her hair. They asked her obscene questions, searched for her sickness, the chink that would let them into her strangeness. She never let them. She learned how to close her mind, how to disappear in her seat, how to blur the sound of searing voices chanting her name. (92-93)



Here, Jemorah experiences another episode of rejection, this time at the hands of her schoolmates, as she undergoes a painful process which starts with a realization of her difference:

One day someone tore out a handful of her hair; on another someone pushed her down as she stood to leave; on another someone racked scratches across her face and neck as she stood, her eyes full, the sound of her name ringing in rounds of incantation. Waiting to leave, she could see her name on the mailbox from a half mile away, four inches high in bright red against the black box: RAMOUD. Matussem had been so eager to proclaim their arrival. There was no hiding or disguising it. She would run off the bus, straight to her room, but the voices would follow and circle her bed at night. (93)

Jemorah's Arab half, which once led to her grandparents' denial, seems also to impact her first experience of socialization as a kid at school. The other kids' mockery that turns sometimes into harassment dominates Jem's everyday life as a child to the point that it haunts her nights.

This tormenting experience not only makes the girl open her eyes to her difference from others but also helps her develop her own strategy of defense consisting of just "disappearing." Once she gets on the bus, she simultaneously crosses the door of her own world where her tormentors' voices are just reduced to a background noise. Moreover, she creates a new world of her own where she forbids access to these kids, which helps her become strong enough to ignore their comments and mockery. In this context, Kristeva states that: "the foreigner feels strengthened by the distance that detaches him from the others as it does from himself and gives him the lofty sense not so much of holding the truth but of making it and himself relative" (7). Therefore, Jem tries to find comfort in this distance separating her from the kids on the bus, and hence she increases the barrier created by the latter. The girl's daily trip to and from school becomes a painful journey to alienation, self-effacement and inconspicuousness. In this way, Jem learns how to become invisible.

From my point of view, Abu-Jaber intends to use Jem's situation here in order to make a reference to the invisibility of the Arab American community as a whole. In this context, Joanna Kadi considers that Arab Americans are "the Most Invisible of the Invisibles" (xix). She explains that she has coined this phrase to describe the community because "it is not only white people who refuse to see us, it is other people of color – Latinos, Africans, Asians, Natives – who do not acknowledge our existence" (xx). Thus, Kadi evokes the Arab Americans' struggle to be recognized as a minority group within America's multiethnic fabric after decades of marginalization and indifference. In this way, *Arabian Jazz* (1993) is in harmony with other Arab American writers' efforts to illustrate their community's experience in the United States, and most importantly, reinforce the Arab American discourse within its American multicultural context. Hence the omnipresence of the color line in the novel.

Abu-Jaber's deliberate crossing of color boundaries affects the already complex identity plot, and consequently, the Arab American identities in the making. In fact, one of the novel's most revealing scenes is s Jem's confrontation with Portia, her supervisor at the hospital. Jemorah's numerous attempts to quit her unrewarding office job have repeatedly faced Portia's intimidation, until the day she decides to leave for good. The supervisor calls her into her office, and there she reveals her intention to keep her under her command. She starts her sermon talking about Jem's mother,

Your mother used to be such a good girl. She was so beautifully white, pale as a flower. And then, I don't know. What happened? The silly girl wanted attention. She met your father in her second year [of college] and she just wanted attention... This *man*, he couldn't speak a word of our language, didn't have a real job. And Nora was so – like a flower, a real flower, I'm telling you. It seemed like three days after she met that man they were getting married. A split second later she was pregnant. I know for a fact her poor mother – your grandmother – had to ask for a picture of the man for her parish priest to show around to prove he wasn't a Negro. Though he might as well have been, really, who could tell the difference, the one lives about the same as the other. (Abu-Jaber 1993: 293-94)

To Jem's dismay, Portia is telling the story of Matussem and Nora according to her own perception of things. Her distress is increased as Portia raises her voice more and more, and consequently, "the hospital office transformed from a metaphor of totalitarian control into a white mold that reflects the traditional American metanarrative of forced assimilation" (Salaita 2001: 437). Portia continues talking about Nora:

She never did finish college after that, never got to be the woman she could've been. A husband and a baby at twenty. Look at what *I've* done with my life. You know, it's not too late for you. Oh, sure, you're tainted, your skin that color. A damn shame. But I've noticed that in certain lights it's worse than in others. Your mother could have made such beautiful children – they could have been so lovely, like she was, like a white rose. Still it could definitely have been worse for you, what with *his* skin. Now, if you were to change your name, make it Italian maybe, or even Greek, that may help some. I'm telling you this for love of your mother. I'll feel forever I might have saved her when that Arab man took her and you kids back to that horrible country of his over there. It's a wonder any of you survived that place, so evil, primitive, filled with disease! I should've spoken up twenty years ago, but I didn't. I thought, the Lord will provide, blah, blah. She could always have the marriage annulled. I thought I should butt out, let Nora make her own mistakes. Well, not anymore, now I'm telling you, Jemorah Ramoud and all his kind aren't any better than Negroes, that's why he hasn't got any ambition and why he'll be stuck in that same job in the basement for the rest of his life. They'd never promote him any higher. He only got where he is now on my say-so, because I feel for you kids. And now you can go that way, too, or you can come under my wing and let *me* educate you, really get you somewhere. We'll try putting some pink lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you *American*. (Abu-Jaber: 1993, 294-95)

I am here quoting Portia's full discourse because, in my opinion, it is highly relevant as it reveals her extremely racist speech not only towards Arabs but towards African Americans as well.

First, Portia dismisses Nora's choice of partner as she refuses to accept any possibility of a genuine love affair between a white woman and a Jordanian immigrant. However, she considers that she just wanted some attention through her decision to do something different and, hence, to marry an Arab man. Then, she contrasts Nora's

whiteness with Matussem's supposed darkness. She describes the Irish American Woman as "pale as a flower," which makes reference to a concept dating back to the history of slavery and segregation in the United States. This concerns the comparison of white women with flowers, which are the symbol of innocence and purity, and whose petals protect their virginity from barbaric black penetration. In fact, Portia associates Matussem with blackness as she perceives no difference between Arabs and black people; this refers to the fact that in America black is anything that is not "all-white." In this context, David Hollinger argues that "white and nonwhite are the two relevant categories, and all distinctions between various 'colored' peoples are less significant than the fact they are nonwhite" (24-25).

According to Portia, Nora's sin is having broken the "one-drop rule" through mixing her blood with that of a man of color. Portia's attitude conveys the internalization of a long tradition of white supremacy over African Americans and people of color, hence her use of "Negro" as a prototypical term for nonwhites. Her speech portrays the perception of difference according to American standards. She limits Americanness to whiteness, while she considers Arabness a threat to American whiteness. Thus, Abu-Jaber uses Portia, as a white Anglo-Saxon, in order to criticize, once more, another aspect of America's common cultural attitudes. In this way, she employs a vocabulary that can be described as the language of oppression so as to display this common racist discourse that she condemns.

On the other hand, Portia considers herself a savior with a civilizing mission, that of saving this Arab American young woman. She warns Jem that she will always be an inferior misfit unless she accepts her offer to help her get rid of her parental Arab heritage that she considers savage, primitive and impure. As a representative of the dominant culture, Portia believes that Jemorah's skin color and name are definitely

markers of inferiority. Hence, she reduces her to a state of inferiority, and later offers to rescue her. The supervisor here is orchestrating a forced session of Americanization aiming to mold Jemorah into an American creature, according to her own conception of Americanness, of course. This is why she invites her to lighten her hair color, and change her name and make it sound Italian or Greek, so as to make believe she belongs to a more acceptable ethnic group. Mona Fayad challenges the generalized portrayal of the Arab woman as “silent, passive, helpless, in need of rescue by the West. But there’s also that other version of her, exotic and seductive, that follows me in the form of the Belly Dancer” (170). Portia classifies Jemorah as representing the first version of the Arab woman mentioned here by Fayad, one who needs help to be saved.

The idea of changing Jemorah’s name may come from Abu-Jaber’s own experience. In an Interview with Robin E. Field, she mentions how a professor told her once: “‘if you publish under Abu-Jaber, people are always going to think of you as the ethnic writer. You should absolutely change it to an American name and just go for it.’ Obviously I didn’t” (213). While the writer criticizes the restrictiveness of some imposed features and characteristics of being American as expressed by America’s subjected citizens, she offers a flexible alternative of American identity in a continuous process of negotiation, encompassing all the components of the American nation.

However, Portia is not the only character who uses the term “Negro” to refer to Matussem. Hilma Otts, Peachy’s mother, for instance, calls the Arab American man the “darky foreigner” from whom “she had to keep her own distance” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 89). His boss at the hospital refers to him as “the dirty sand nigger” (99). Even Fred, the gas station owner whose poor white workers play jazz with Matussem, calls the latter the “damn fool, foreign A-rab’ that lives next door” (113). Therefore, Abu-Jaber is blurring the race borderline, as she tries to draw a common ground between Arab

Americans and other minority groups, particularly African Americans in this case. The identification is tackled by Salaita when he points that:

the commonalities among Arabs and other minorities are powerfully represented here and serve to counter the commonplaces of tolerance in the dominant culture. Abu-Jaber portrays this culture from the perspective of its subjected citizens; in her analysis its underpinnings contradict the descriptions offered by the popular media and by “common sense” (2001: 438).

Now I want to consider another scene at the end of the book, where we can perceive, again, white people’s prejudices against Arabs. The whole scene plays successfully again at undermining – with Abu-Jaber’s fine use of irony—one of the leit-motifs of American literature and culture, “the place elsewhere,” the virgin space in the land, forest and lake, where the laws of civilization are suspended. On Labor Day weekend, Matussem takes his daughters, his sister Fatima and her husband Zaeed on an outing, to an all-American picnic in nature, in a place called ironically “Fair Haven Park.” The scene includes all the typical American components of popular culture. In this park “the trees hung silky drops of leaves, where the air was sweet against the frame of water” (361). Even the presence of the passers-by, to whom Matussem offers food – shish kebab – has a topical American flavor: “Two young men with ponytails and beards” redolent of the sixties beats “stopped and sat with them, talking and eating, telling the Ramouds about where they’d hiked and how they’d been living on peanut butter and jelly for the past five days” (360).

The topicality of the scene, of the paradise in nature, where the rules of culture are suspended, and therefore could be an ideal setting for the development of that double identity, is shattered by both parties, as if opposites could not coalesce in the blending of the Arab Americanness, not even in the state of grace that this “Fair Haven Park” provides. On the one hand, “Fatima held aloof, eyeing [the two young men’s]

long hair, the dusty clothes. She'd told Jem several times that perfectly fine husbands can come out of a good scrubbing, but something else troubled her, something deeper: a sense of danger" (360). Fatima goes to the extent that "she refused to speak the whole time the boys sat at their table. At one point, Melvie rapped her knuckles on the table and said to her aunt, 'Where are your manners? Make an effort!'" (360).

On the other hand, the two young men's attitude changes drastically when they learn about the Arab origins of the Ramouds. "After an hour or more of eating their meat and bread, drinking their beer, of conversation, of songs from Matussem and Zaeed," one of the boys asks them before leaving: "So what are you all anyway? Italians? Wet-backs?" Matussem "smiled at them openly" and tells them proudly, "We are Arab. From Jordan" (361). The boy's reaction is shocking as he

made a strange little yelp. "A-rabs!" he said, his eyes now full of what looked like a twist of amusement and disgust. He turned to the other boy and said, "Arabs, Jesus fucking Christ. And we ate their food." The other boy grabbed his friend and tugged him away. As they left Matussem heard them laughing. (361)

The Ramouds are appalled by the young men's racist and humiliating attitude towards them, so much so that "no one said much after the boys had gone. They packed up and left soon after" (361). In fact, Abu-Jaber uses a set of received motifs from the American tradition to undermine the ingenuous vision of America as a land of immigrants.

As we have seen so far, the writer portrays attitudes of supremacy among white Americans, not only middle-class but ironically lower classes too, who try to compensate for their inferior economic status by exhibiting racial superiority to "niggers" and "sand niggers." Hence, in her focus on the duality of Arab American identity, she criticizes American social behavior based on stereotypes and essentializations. In this way, Homi Bhabha argues that "the identity between

stereotypes which through repetition, also become different; the discriminatory identities constructed across traditional cultural norms and classifications, the Simian Black, the Lying Asiatic – all these are *metonymies* of presence” (1994: 90). The repetition of these “discriminatory identities” may become a form of affirmation and identification with them.

In fact, this process leads to the creation of identities of resistance in order to overcome discrimination and give it a totally opposite effect. Therefore, the result of this process is a kind of affirmation of the presence of, and pride in, this identity, and in this case the Arab American identity in the making. Abu-Jaber focuses on how her Arab American characters are constantly treated as Negroes, sand niggers, inferior, savage, among other things, in order to counter-claim this discourse produced by the dominant culture, and offer instead an image of a multilayered and negotiated Arab American identity. As an example of this, she gives Matussem the possibility to overcome some of the racism he is suffering in his work and social entourage by inviting the gas station workers to form a jazz band with him. He chooses jazz to extend communicative lines to working-class Anglo-Americans in his adopted home.

This alienating atmosphere which represents a site of struggle and negotiation for these Arab American characters makes it hard for them to find their way, especially after the loss of the intermediary who might have built bridges between them and America: Nora. Matussem’s and his daughters’ lives are forever changed by the death of Nora, the wife and mother. Jem seems stuck and undecided as she is unable to think beyond her current situation, working in a meaningless job that she hates, and struggling with what it means to be an Arab American. Her sister Melvie, on the contrary, is shocked into action by witnessing her mother’s death, and consequently, she decides to become a nurse as a way to fight death. Even their father seems lost as Nora left him



with a shattered dream of the family he wanted to have in America. He becomes keen on drumming as a way to constantly connect with his dead wife and perform the rhythm of his love to her. The characters' lives, therefore, are shaped by Nora's omnipresent memory.

The trauma of the mother's loss is deeply connected to the girls' consciousness about themselves not only as individuals, but as Arab Americans as well. The absence of a caring mother prevents them from having a path which guides them into America, a country where they are considered as the "Other." In this sense, Susan Peck MacDonald points out that many women novelists of the nineteenth century created young heroines who "[did] not have strong supportive mothers" (59), such as Jane Eyre and Catherine Earnshaw. She states that

The absence of mothers [from women's fiction]. . . seems. . . to derive not from the impotence or unimportance of mothers, but from the almost excessive power of motherhood; the good supportive mother is potentially so powerful a figure as to prevent her daughter's trials from occurring, to shield her from the process of maturation, and thus to disrupt the focus and equilibrium of the novel (58).

Abu-Jaber, then, adheres to the absent mother tradition as she deliberately invites her female protagonists to muddle through without their mother's help until they sort out their issues of identity on their own.

Thus, the writer intends to let Jem and Melvie have their own struggle during this journey and allow them in this way to create their own stories. In her interview with Robin E. Field, Abu-Jaber explains this point, referring to it as "metaphorically killing the parents" (216). She adds that "you've got to put them way away from you and say 'I have to have an imaginative space in which to recreate myself.'" This is exactly what she is doing with her protagonists, and that she describes as an obsession of hers to observe the characters' development in these specific circumstances. "How did they do

it? How do you live as a kind of metaphorical orphan in America? And what does that mean?” (217). On the other hand, the mother’s absence is so powerful, and her memory so strongly present that it has strongly marked the girls in different ways that I will explore separately in later sections of this chapter.

In the middle of all this, we find the domineering character of Aunt Fatima, Matussem’s sister, who tries to play the role of adviser for her nieces, and hence fill the space left by the missing mother. Fatima can be described as the ambassador of the Old Country in America whom Abu-Jaber makes use of in order to test the validity of many of the teachings and principles the aunt intends to transmit to her American nieces.

### **3.1.2 De-mythologizing the Old Country and the Burden of Representation**

In her article entitled “‘Imaginary Homelands’ – Lebanese American Prose,” Evelyn Shakir explains how many early Arab American writers tried to “recreate” the homeland left behind, whether by them or by their ancestors. The Arab homeland was referred to as the “Mysterious East” that Gibran Kahlil Gibran, for instance, depicted as “the land of mystics and prophets.” Early Arab immigrants’ claim that the Holy Land was their country of origin was also reflected in the autobiographies of the epoch, such as the writings of Abraham Rihbany, who focuses on his Christian identity and links his origins to Jesus Christ’s place of birth. When it comes to second-generation Arab American writers, Shakir points out “the shift in rhetoric and purpose.” She states that for writers like Vance Bourjaily and Eugene Paul Nassar, the Old Country “may remain a blessed land but one with religious reference mostly washed away. Instead it has become a secular icon of sanity and bedrock morality and, as such, an implicit rebuke of American society.” Then Shakir moves to contemporary Arab American writers and states that “prompted by feminist impulse or by the horror of war or simply by the

revisionist spirit of the age, these writers have set about de-mythologizing the homeland.”<sup>18</sup>

In this same context, interviewed by Elham Gheytnchi for *The Iranian* online newspaper, the editor of *Al Jadid*, Elie Chalala, mentions the growing volume of Arab American literature which

tends to be very secular and critical of patriarchal norms. The early phase of these writings tended to be nostalgic. But I would say that most Arab-American writers have transcended the nostalgic phase. There are a variety of genres present in their writings; their work is sophisticated and multi-layered.<sup>19</sup>

*Arabian Jazz* (1993) put an end to nostalgia and opened the door for the critique of the Arab homeland and its idealized culture. From this point of view, Tanyss Ludescher argues that this novel

produced a flurry of controversy because it broke an unwritten rule in the Arab American community that members should not criticize Arabs and Arab Americans in public. In her imaginative and comic novel, Abu-Jaber lampoons American society, attacking, in particular, anti-Arab bigots, as well as Arab society. (104)

While I dedicated the previous section to display Abu-Jaber’s dissection of American society and her critique of certain American cultural behaviors, I intend, in this part, to shed light on the writer’s efforts to undo the romanticized image of the Old Country.

Aunt Fatima is undoubtedly the champion of her homeland’s conservative values that she tries to sustain in America. She emerges as a loud, sentimental, melodramatic and amusing matchmaker who is obsessed with the idea of finding Arab husbands for her nieces. Fatima’s character, however, is much more complex than that, as Abu-Jaber makes use of her to invoke the memory of female experience of the past in

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<sup>18</sup> Shakir, Evelyn. “‘Imaginary Homelands’ – Lebanese American Prose.” *Al Jadid* 9.42 – 3 (2003).  
<http://www.aljadid.com/content/imaginary-homelands-lebanese-american-prose>

<sup>19</sup> Gheytnchi, Elham. “More than That.” *The Iranian*. December 2002.  
<<http://iranian.com/Opinion/2002/December/Chalala/index.html>>

the country of origin. Much of Matussem's sister's life has been shaped by trauma and loss. While she moved from Jordan to America in the early sixties, "a year after [her brother] did, in order to keep an eye on him" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 3), her journey was inspired by her traumatic experiences of poverty, burials and imprisonment back home. The dark part of it is definitely her participation in the burial alive of four infant sisters.

When I was writing my Master thesis, I hesitated whether to tackle this important point, until I made up my mind to avoid even mentioning it. I resorted to what I may call self-censorship in order to avoid the uncovering of such a delicate theme because I thought that this pre-Islamic custom had disappeared for ever. In fact, the burying of female infants alive was fairly widespread in the Arabian Peninsula in "Jahiliyya," or the period known as the era of ignorance previous to the appearance of Islam. In a society dominated by inter-tribal wars at that time, many fathers preferred to bury their new-born baby girls alive than for them to be captured by rival tribes which was considered a humiliation and disgrace for the girl's family and tribe. However, this custom came to an end with Islam, which considered the killing of female infants a serious murder. For instance, this point is mentioned in the eighty first chapter or "surah" of the Holy Quran entitled Al Takwir, or the Overthrowing, which tells about the signs of the coming of the Judgment Day. The verses 8 and 9 include a clear condemnation of female infanticide, "when the female (infant) buried alive, is questioned (8) for what crime she was killed (9)." <sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the murderers of these baby girls will be judged that day for their crimes.

Now, returning to Fatima's case, she participates in the burial of her infant sisters with her parents when she is very young, out of need and poverty. She explains

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<sup>20</sup> The Holy Quran, translated into English by Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan and published by the King Fahd Printing Complex, Madinah, Saudi Arabia in 1998.

that this happened after her family was driven off their land by the Israelis, and consequently, lost everything. She talks about this traumatic experience to her nieces:

When we were homeless and dying without food, what of the four starving babies I had to bury still alive ... Babies I buried with my mother watching this so this rest could live, so my baby brother can eat, so he can move away and never know about it... [P]raise Allah he was born so fortunate! Born a man, not to know the truth. (334)

Hence, the dispossessed family has to sacrifice some of its young female members in order to save the other children especially Matussem, who is the only son in a family of many daughters. While Fatima is trying to give voice to the trauma that has been haunting her during her whole life, and through her attempt to acknowledge it as a way to transcend it, she does not miss the opportunity to convey messages related to her homeland's patriarchal social order. This has allowed Matussem, the only boy, to be spared the hardships endured by his sisters. Abu-Jaber takes the reader back to Matussem's childhood memories when

his mother had cradled his head between her breasts, even when he became gangly, arms and legs spilling from her lap. She had stroked his head, called him *my eyes*, even as she lifted her voice, a shard of anger at his sisters, saying, "Move faster! Awkward, donkey, beanstalk! Lower your face, rude girl!" (187)

Then, while Matussem receives his mother's affection and love, his sisters receive insults and scolding. His images of home, therefore, carry this sexist differentiation in the way the family treats its children. These memories of Jordan bring back to him the image of his "so many lonely sisters" and "the social restrictions that kept them home" (233). In fact, "his parents had married several of his sisters to men they had never seen before in their lives" (237). Matussem ends up understanding out of his own grown-up experience that it is "a bitter thing to be a woman" (187) back home.

Fatima is aware of this reality but she accepts and defends it instead of rejecting it and trying to change it. She is the voice of the past working as a vehicle that transmits cultural values that oppress women. In this respect, she “had a speech that she often made to her nieces” when she explains how

it’s terrible to be a woman in this world. This is first thing to know when the doctor looks at baby’s thing and says “it’s a girl.” But I’m telling you, there are ways of getting around it. It helps to have a good bust, but don’t worry... There are things you don’t know yet that I know perfect, and first and last is that you must have husband to survive on the planet of earth. (116-17)

Therefore, Fatima is definitely “true to the ways of her mother and mothers before her” (41), as she perceives the female in relation to the man. Her value depends on the degree of importance she acquires in a man’s life. These are the ways and the traditional ideals she tries to perpetuate and bring to America through her nieces. In this context, Salwa Essayah Chérif argues that, “with her memory of the past, she serves as the instrument of a gendered return to their ethnic roots” (216). Thus, the creation of the character of the aunt conveys Abu-Jaber’s critique of “the old tradition of female perpetuation of female oppression” (Chérif 2003: 213).

Becoming the maternal figure for Jem and Melvie after their mother’s death, Fatima struggles to reproduce the oppressive models of her idealized past in America. That’s why she always expresses her concern that her nieces, having reached the ages of twenty-nine and twenty-two respectively, are still unengaged. She believes it her duty to lead her nieces to “marry *someone’s* son and preserve the family’s name and honor” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 10). In this way, marrying off her nieces to Arab men would guarantee, according to her, the protection of the girls from “foreign” influence and the continuity of the homeland’s reconstructed ways. Thus, marriage becomes here the

symbol of a cage restricting women's freedom and orienting them towards the traditions they are invited to continue and preserve.

Without doubt, Fatima is doing her best to intervene in her nieces' construction of their Arab American female identity and consequently keep them under her sphere of control. The aunt does not miss any opportunity to express her rejection of mixing with Americans. For instance, when one of her nephews marries an American woman, she "attended the wedding dressed in black and gave them a card written in Arabic, 'Samir, this would kill your sainted mother, bless her sacred name, if she were still alive'" (43-44). The wedding, in this case, becomes a funeral symbolized by the color of Fatima's outfits. She believes that as a consequence of this union, Samir will be cut off from his old ways and ties which an Arab wife could properly preserve. The black color, then, refers to the mourning for the loss of Samir as a member of the community as well as the breaking of the female chain perpetuating the homeland's patriarchal social order.

In my opinion, Fatima's obsession with the marriage issue shapes her relationship with her resisting nieces whom she tries to instill from an early age that the family's honor depends on them. This idea is shared by the girls' other aunts, as well:

It seemed to Jem that virtually from the hour of her mother's passing, her aunts had converged around her with warnings about men. They told her: stay with your father, he needs you now; ignore boys, they're stupid and dangerous; you don't know what they can do to you, what they want to do. Each summer, visiting Auntie Nabila or Lutfea or Nejla would take Jem's face between her hands and examine Jem's lips to see if she'd been kissed. "Not yet," they'd whisper, crossing themselves. "*Al humad'illah*, thanks be to God. She's a good girl!" (9-10)

Here Abu-Jaber questions a main issue related to Arab culture, concerning the commonly widespread image of the woman as the standard-bearer of the family's honor, which is closely associated to female sexuality. In this case, the writer exposes how female virginity is considered to be symbol and guarantee of honor, hence the

restrictions imposed on women to contain and control their sexuality. Accordingly, it seems that the only way to maintain a family's honor is through finding a suitable Arab husband for a virgin daughter according to the conventions of their Arab background. In this way, the daughter moves from her family's control sphere to that of her husband's.

From my point of view, these traditional values are intended to extend the family's oppressive control over the individual. In this respect, the Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatima Mernissi argues that:

Individualism, the person's claim to have legitimate interests, views and opinions different from those of the group, is an alien concept in and fatal to heavily collectivist Islam. Islam, like any theocracy, is group-oriented, and individual wishes are put down as impious, whimsical, egotistical passions. I would suggest, however, that the woman identified in the Muslim order as the embodiment of uncontrolled desire and undisciplined passions, is precisely the symbol of heavily suppressed individualistic trends. (1996: 110)<sup>21</sup>

While Mernissi here specifically speaks about women in Muslim societies, I would like to point out that her argument concerns Arab societies in general. It is true that Islam is not the religion of all Arabs, but it remains the predominant faith in the Arab world where it gives shape to social and gender structures. Taking into account my intention to avoid any essentialization concerning a single Arab social pattern, there are still many unifying features which highlight the blending of religion and traditions in this part of the world depending, of course, on the specific characteristics of each country. Hence, this complex fusion of religion and traditions continues to provide a basis for social order and definitely gender relations in these countries. In this sense, the lives of many Muslim and / or Arab people are still affected by the duality of religion and traditions which provides for a patriarchal system tending to favor gender discrimination at the expense of women.

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<sup>21</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996.



Aunt Fatima, then, is the vehicle of this ethnic memory that she struggles to perpetuate through her nieces in America. Her teachings conveying her homeland's principle of containing women's sexuality explain her obsession with the idea of marrying off Jemorah and Melvina. In this context, the Iraqi writer Alia Mamdouh reveals how "the women of the family insisted: 'be gentle, soft, adorn yourself, fatten up and in the end you will get married and have children'" (1998:66)<sup>22</sup>. Here again, getting married and making babies seems to be women's natural destiny as they cannot be conceived in any other role. Fatima, therefore, makes of the idea of marriage a priority and an objective. In her book of lists, she has a part entitled "What I CAN'T STAND about my life," where she writes as number one the following, "1. My America nieces (Jemorah and Melvina) who are going to send me to mental hospital with so much worries about who are they ever going to marry" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 110).

The culmination of Fatima's efforts in the search for Arab husbands is portrayed during the welcoming party organized by the Syrian Orthodox Church in honor of a visiting Jordanian archbishop. In fact, the party has turned into an exhibition of matchmaking which is actually a common habit within the Arab American community whether among Christian or Muslim members. In this context, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad asserts that "special efforts are made to get the young people to meet each other so that they will socialize and marry within the group and thus be protected from the temptations of the dominant culture" (1994: 72).

Abu-Jaber makes use of this party in order to construct a very humorous scene where she ironically places Fatima in her own territory, where her quest for husbands takes an almost cartoon-like quality. She initiates the hunt with her war cry of "Time is for arranging. Husband time" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 61). She starts scrutinizing the party

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<sup>22</sup> Mamdouh, Alia. "Creatures of Arab Fear." *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*. Ed. Fadia Faqir. Lebanon: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 1998.

room looking for a victim, or rather two victims to hunt. “She moved like a sheikh, with the sword of her gaze tearing away veils, appraising family trees, bank accounts, and social standing” (62). After some failed attempts, she starts to become desperate to the point that she cries “By Allah, would you send us a husband!” (63).

After that, Fatima succeeds to making an “electric” matchmaking try when she introduces her nieces to a candidate that Abu-Jaber calls “Salaam Alaikum” after the Arabic greeting, which adds a mocking tone to the scene. When the aunt presents this “old-looking young man” as a university professor, his mother appears.

“I’m the mother,” the woman commanded. “I want to look over this daughter-in-law.” She circled around Jem and grabbed her jaw. “Open.” Jem jerked back as Melvie grabbed the woman’s wrist. “Unhand her!” Melvie cried.

“Naughty, naughty girls” the mother said, while Fatima sighed heavily as if to say, I know, I know. “How can I know my daughter-in-law before I know her teeth? You told me she was a good, obedient girl, sweet as a chicken.”

“Back off lady!” Melvie raised a fist. “I’m warning you.”

“Allah the merciful and munificent! A demon-*ifrit*.”

Melvie and the mother began bickering, waving their hands at each other. (64)

This incident includes a heavy dose of satire as we have the impression that the party room has been converted into a market. More importantly, the supposed future mother-in-law’s attempt to check Jem’s teeth is highly significant as it is reminiscent of the behavior of merchants in slave or even animal markets. The mother-in-law is trying to check the degree of Jem’s suitability so as to judge whether or not she is good enough for her son.

This scene reminds of a short story entitled “Remember Vaughn Monroe”<sup>23</sup> by Evelyn Shakir who comically treats this same topic of searching for brides and grooms

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<sup>23</sup> Shakir, Evelyn. “Remember Vaughn Monroe.” *Post Gibran Anthology of Arab American Writing*. Ed. Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash. W. Bethesda: Kitab, 1999.

within the community. Here I quote a long passage from the story because I consider that it is worth noting:

Well, the joke was on them 'cause they had a hard job getting rid of those gals. And it's not because they weren't pretty, they were pretty enough. But they didn't know how to catch a husband, and that's the long and the short of it. With Emmie, it was easy. One day, Mitch's grandma put her fur piece around her neck and rode the commuter cars from Boston to Farmingham because a little Arab birdie whispered in her ear that this family from Zahle – that's her hometown in Lebanon – they had a pack of "brides" available.

When Auntie Mai heard company on the porch, she did like always and whipped off her apron. Then put on a smile, opened the door, and sang out the usual "*Ahlan wa sahlán*," which is just a fancy Arabic way of saying "Welcome." Then the two of them sat down like old school chums and started chatting about this and that but not the main thing... When they'd been gabbing long enough, auntie showed off the merchandise, making the gals parade into the living-room, meek as lambs, carrying trays of Turkish coffee and giant pistachios and home-made macaroons and Fannie Farmer chocolates. The old lady says, "Bless your hands" four times – to Evelyn and Yvonne and Antoinette and Belle. But when she sees Emmie bringing in the grapes, she says, "That's the one." (1999: 224-25)

In this passage, Shakir takes the reader to a typical Arab household in Boston where the homeland's traditions are still present. She treats the traditional marriage proposal practice through humor in order to soften her critique of what is perceived as the heavy burden carried by Arab American parents to marry off their daughters and the difficulty of finding them suitable Arab husbands in America.

I would argue that both Abu-Jaber and Shakir employ ethnic humor in order to somehow soften their critique of the community. This inward-turning wit may be perceived as an internalization of the dominant discourse oriented rather toward ridiculing Arabs as well as Arab culture and traditions. This supposed identification with the hegemonic mode of perception may even be viewed as a celebration of cultural clichéd stereotyping of the community and its strategy of domination, which explains, in many ways, the raising of some disapproving voices against *Arabian Jazz* (1993)

from the members of the community itself. However, the function of humor, according to Abu-Jaber, is rather to create a kind of connection or bridge with the audience. In this context, the writer tells Steven Salaita, “I thought it would be a fairly serious book at first, actually, but humor seemed to present itself as a natural medium – I suppose because when you’re not sure what sort of reception your story will have, humor seems to offer more accessibility or intimacy” (2001: 435).

Therefore, Abu-Jaber’s use of humor in her fictional account of the Arab American experience is a way to contain the tension created by her attempts to demystify her community’s culture. Moreover, she intends to reduce the gap between the two cultures in question through suggesting the possibility of a cultural duality based on dialogue and negotiation. The latter is made possible through questioning some cultural aspects so as to reflect upon them, and humor seems to help. In this respect, Lisa Suhair Majaj says writes:

As we continue to strengthen our networks and develop our group identity, we need to expand our vision and move beyond cultural preservation toward transformation. We need to probe the American as well as the Arab dimensions of our Arab American identity, and to engage not only in self-assertion, but also in self-criticism... We need to take a hard look not only at who we are, but at who we hope to become. (1999: 71)

This is clearly what Abu-Jaber is doing in her novel. While she explains that “humor came through my writing because it felt comfortable and it felt like a way to make the community that I was dealing with seem accessible, human, and familiar” (Evans 1996: 43-44), it also helps her in the task of digging deep inside the components of the Arab American identity. The author’s perspective raises the dilemma of representation, taking into account that such tendency does not seem to greatly please some members of the Arab American community.

This approach adopted by Abu-Jaber is met with hostility by some critics belonging to the Arab American community who consider her work a naïve interpretation of current misconceptions about Arab characters in America. Criticism is not only directed at her choice of themes and the portrayal of her characters, but her light tone and the distinctive sense of humor that permeates the novel is seen as a betrayal of certain Arab values. Interviewed by Jonathan Curiel for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, she comments that due to the scarcity of representations of Arab Americans “the book got looked at under a microscope.” She explains how the novel was put under scrutiny by some members of her community many of whom think that the author has reinforced anti-Arab stereotypes through what they consider her ridiculing and satirizing of Arab and Arab American families. Abu-Jaber tells Curiel,

I think people felt it was mocking and glib. And there were just a lot of people mad it wasn't their story. A woman (in the United States, whose parents were from Lebanon) wrote to me – she was so pissed – saying, “My father was nothing like the father in your novel. My dad was never so liberal. I don't know what kind of father this is supposed to be.” (Curiel 2004)<sup>24</sup>

In this respect, Elaine Hagopian's review of the novel illustrates the controversy raised by *Arabian Jazz* concerning the issue of representation. This critic, for instance, accuses Abu-Jaber of presenting an inaccurate portrayal of Arab Americans in her book; she considers that “its content represents a stereotype of a stereotype with quite a number of implausible representations” (1). She even claims that the Arab American characters displayed in the novel misrepresent the community which may lead to the distortion of the reader's understanding of Arab culture. On the other hand, Andrea Shalal-Esa comments on the cool reception of the novel when she mentions that an

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<sup>24</sup> Curiel, Jonathan. “An Arab American Writer Seeks Her Identity.” *San Francisco Chronicle*. May 24, 2004.  
<<http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/An-Arab-American-writer-seeks-her-identity-2773799.php>>

Arab American reader, infuriated by the book's reference to female infanticide addresses the author saying that Arabs "don't do these things. And even when they do, you don't write about it." In addition, Shalal-Esa points out that "some Arab American critics tore [*Arabian Jazz*] to shreds. One reviewer accused Abu-Jaber of falling into a naïve liberal feminism and perpetuating clichéd representations of Arabs" (4).<sup>25</sup>

The reviewer mentioned by Shalal-Esa here is Mervat F. Hatem who argues that:

a naïve liberal feminism, in the name of celebrating cultural diversity, has attempted to romanticize the Arab American experience, including its history of racism and cultural stereotyping. In *Arabian Jazz*, the author Diana Abu-Jaber reveled in a fictional account of the imperfections of Arab American experiences including the celebration of the hegemonic cultural stereotypes of the groups and its racist portrayal. In using many of the clichéd representations of Arabs, Arab Americans and/or Muslims as aspects of their reality that have entertainment value, she claimed that these fictional accounts celebrated cultural diversity. (383-84)

In this context, it is useful to mention here the reaction of some members of the Chinese American community in the United States to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), especially the critic and playwright Frank Chin, who denounces the writer's representation of Chinese culture. He argues that Kingston's reinterpretation of the Chinese myth of the heroic feminine figure of Fa Mulan is actually a distortion, which "is simply a device for destroying history and literature" (3). He adds that the novel's false representation of the Chinese male community is actually based on the white stereotypes of Chinese exoticism. Thus, he considers that "Maxine Hong Kingston has defended her revision of Chinese history, culture, and childhood literature and myth by restating a white racist stereotype" (29).

Abu-Jaber explains the concern of her community by the fact that "Arab Americans have been so maltreated by the media, their image has been so dark, that I

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<sup>25</sup> Shalal-Esa, Andrea. "Diana Abu-Jaber: The Only Response to Silencing... is to Keep Speaking." *Al Jadid Magazine*, Vol. 8, N° 39 (Spring 2002). Print.

think there's a real anxiety about the artistic representations that are out there" (Shalal-Esa 2002: 6). As we can see, in this case the novel is not perceived as a literary work or a fiction, because as Pauline Kaldas states, "the question becomes to what extent should a writer cater to the reader's tendency to read a novel as if it were a sociological or anthropological text" (168). Accordingly, the focus becomes oriented towards the behavior of the Arab American characters as well as what are considered to be inaccurate details concerning, for instance, historical events or religious elements, and thus dismissing the literary merit of the novel. In this way, "such responses reveal the tension between the author's right to create fictional events and the audience's predilection to take those events as truths" (Kaldas 2006: 175).

Therefore, being almost the first novel to treat Arab American themes, *Arabian Jazz* (1993) has faced this complex issue related to the dilemma of representation, taking into account Arab Americans' expectations of a positive depiction of themselves. However, Abu-Jaber has chosen to lean towards critique rather than celebration. From my point of view, there is little to celebrate about an idealized gendered ethnic past, for instance, which reveals an essentialist perception of one's identity and the deliberate intention to perpetrate such patriarchal cultural system favoring the oppression of women. So I totally agree with Abu-Jaber in her approach to shedding light on this kind of common behavior through the character of Aunt Fatima while at the same time she presents a different image of the new generation of Arab American women who resist this idealized ethnic memory.

Both sisters Jemorah and Melvina seem to challenge these traditional values although at different levels. While the elder glances once at some Lebanese building workers (whom Fatima has told her about) when she passes them, the younger is the one who is continuously facing her aunt's attempts to find them Arab spouses, and

encouraging her sister to reject them. Both sisters also resist their aunt's perception of America which is constantly reinforced by the visiting Jordanian members of the Ramoud family like uncle Fouad. The latter does not consider America to be the right place to raise one's daughters:

“You see!” Fouad would announce at the sight of a car accident, a woman in a skimpy bathing suit, and / or a gunfight on TV. “You see the place raises this daughters? Drugs, pimps, pushers, every kind of slime coming up through the sewers at night and taking over. In Old Country there nothing like that, just the beautiful grandchildren, dancing around your knees. Here, I don't look out these window after sunset, jinnis and white eyes everywhere. (150-51)

Backed by Fouad who has just come from the Arab homeland, Fatima insists on claiming her ethnic past as a model for her family's present life in America based on her no-mingling principle.

In this sense, not only does Abu-Jaber delineate Fatima's perception of the Arab American self, but also the “Other,” which is in this case Americans. This idea is better illustrated by the following extract:

[Fatima] lived among Americans, in places they had built, among their people, but despite this she wanted to keep herself, her family, and a few friends apart from the rest. She wanted what the Americans had, but at the same time she would never relax her hold on herself. It was not appropriate to mingle. Americans had the money, but the Arabs, ah! They had the food, the culture, the etiquette, the ways of being and seeing and understanding how life was meant to be lived. Her wish, always, no matter what, the sharp wish that cut into her center and had lifted her eyes with hope was that her nieces should marry Arab boys, preferably in the family. (360)

Fatima here constructs a set of comparisons between America and the Arab homeland where she attributes all positive aspects to her own people. She denies the existence of a real American culture which, according to her, ignores everything but the world of money and what money can buy. Thus, Fatima does not show any interest in the culture of the country where she has spent most of her life, as she has chosen to stick to the Old



Country's values and resist integration. It is important here to highlight what Abu-Jaber refers to as the deep "sense of danger" (360) that the aunt feels towards everything American. She perceives Americanization as a threat to the survival of her Arab values in the New World. In fact, she is unable to imagine herself outside this model, hence the absence of the slightest intention to go through a negotiation process to establish her sense of belonging. Therefore, Fatima's case represents one of the identification options offered to Arab American female characters in this novel. Other options are going to be discussed later through the analysis of the nieces' dismantling of the aunt's interference in their process of self identification. However, before that, I will explore Matussem's construction of identity and memory.

### **3.1.3 Matussem: an Arab Father in America**

Abu-Jaber presents a hybridized version of Arab American masculinity through the character of Matussem, whose masculine identity, being the result of a mixture of Arab and American qualities and characteristics, has a transnational nature. This negotiated identity has much to do with the father's construction of memory, which is very present in the shaping of his personality, and also in his interaction with his environment as well as with the other characters. The importance of the father's identity negotiation stems from its impact on his struggle to raise his daughters in this American context and in these circumstances. His struggle is linked to his memory of displacement and loss. In this sense, Jemorah thinks that "displacement was a feature of [her father's] personality" (98), whether in relation to his deceased wife or the image of home.

As I have explained earlier, Matussem's sense of loss is deeply related to his parents' homeland, Palestine, as we learn that he "was only two when his family left Nazareth" (260). We learn as well, through Fatima, that this has been a forced displacement rather than a chosen emigration, when she says: "What of my losses? What of my parents' shame, driven off the good land and sacred home the fathers' fathers built?" (334). Despite the fact that the Ramoud family identify with Jordan as the country of origin, Palestine remains omnipresent as Abu-Jaber tries to make a parallelism between Matussem's family's emigration to Jordan with his own when he leaves Amman for the United States. His migration experience covers up his family's displacement from Palestine to Jordan. In this context, "displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 11).<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, Euclid stands in for Matussem's family's refugee experience, and therefore this American town becomes a representation of Palestine. Hence, Matussem emerges as an Arab immigrant trying to get established in America after his wife's death, while he is haunted by his memories of Palestine.

The second layer of loss is directly related to the death of Nora, which makes a close connection between the lost home and the lost wife and mother. This idea is emphasized by setting Nora's death in Jordan in a way to extend links between the mother and/or wife figure and home: Nora, the woman who has helped Matussem set foot in American life. She is the one who "taught him how to speak a new language, how to handle his new country. His American lover. Through the year of their courtship she took his hands and fed him words like bread from her lips" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 188).

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<sup>26</sup> Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson. "'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 7, N° 1. (February 1992).

The death of Nora signifies not only the loss of the woman he loves but also that of his guide to America.

Matussem's loss is so deep that he is unable to overcome his pain and to make a new life without Nora. The novel, moreover, opens with Matussem's memory of his wife's death nearly two decades before, "When Matussem Ramoud opened his eyes each morning, his wife would still not be there. He was amazed by this" (1). Thus, the reader understands from the very beginning that the death of Matussem's wife is one of the central episodes which has deeply shaped his life forever. Abu-Jaber writes that:

After her death, the mornings opened in Matussem's bed like gray blossoms, like sharp-winged birds slicing dawn in two. Something always reminded him of his loss: seeing the back of his wife's head in a crowd, the flicker of her pale eyes in Jem's dark ones, or Melvina catching her finger to the nape of her neck like her mother. (189-90)

It is obvious how powerful is Matussem's sense of loss, which leads him to try to fill the void through keeping Nora's memory alive. For instance, one night when he is driving back home, he starts thinking about her: "If he had been asked, when he had really been alive – when had life been most vital? – he would have said, without pause, in the arms of his wife" (238). His thoughts make him realize that,

[I]t seemed to him that he had spent the last twenty years seeing the world cloaked, day and night as drapery, where the appearance of life was not life at all, only gestures toward it; *life* was whatever lay behind the curtain. The world, to Matussem, was lying in wait, a place that he would go to someday and resume living. (238)

Abu-Jaber here emphasizes the pain endured by Matussem who is unable to move on with his life. Since he has moved to Euclid, he has continued working at a meaningless job at the town's hospital and taking care of his daughters without even attempting to meet other women. He is waiting for the moment to put an end to this state of stagnation and return to life. However, Nora is the main link between Matussem and America. In

this respect, once he tells his daughters: “Believe me, sometimes I don’t know why I move to these balls-freezer place. Only you mother can get me to stay in these refrigerator” (39). Again, it is Nora who has provided him with the ability to live in the New World.

This double sense of loss rules Matussem’s life as he is torn between the memories of his Palestinian homeland and his struggle to establish himself in America and raise his daughters especially after Nora’s death. This sense of displacement and loss occupies an integral part of Matussem’s personality and definitely has an essential impact on the negotiation of his identity as a father. In addition, the novel places an important focus on this immigrant father’s relationship with his two daughters. He mainly identifies himself as a father, which shows the importance of fatherhood in the construction of his complex character. For instance, this is how he introduces himself in one of his concerts:

“Call me Big Daddy,” Matussem chanted on. “I am Père, Abu, Fader, Señor, Senior. Call me Pappy, Pappa, Padre, PawPaw, Sir! I big Arab coming at you, guy flying in towel, fifty thousand mile a second...Call me Big Daddy! I’ve got a car and two daughters, I’m free! Is my life’s work, is the work of the world, is nice work if you can get. My greatest work, a father! Now for fathers out there in fatherland, a little song we’re making up as we go, I call ‘Big Daddy’!” (148-49)

For Matussem, therefore, fatherhood is a lifetime job that he is pleased and proud to exercise, taking into account that he is aware of the huge responsibility he has to bear to take care of Jem and Melvina. Many scholars like David J. Eggenbeen and Chris Knoester,<sup>27</sup> for instance, in their study on masculinity have investigated questions related to the importance of fatherhood. While emphasizing that fatherhood is important to masculinity, they find that activities of fatherhood and caring for families such as

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<sup>27</sup> Eggenbeen, David J. and Chris Knoester, “Does Fatherhood Matter for Men?” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. Vol. 63, Issue 2 (May 2001). Print.

feeding, nurturing, and participating in direct childcare often take a back-seat to work. They argue that fatherhood is changing, but it is still seen as being centered on a traditional idea of the father as a leader and a provider rather than as a nurturer or cleaner. This is obviously not Matussem's case as a widowed father in charge of taking care of all the needs of his daughters.

Moreover, Matussem's own sense of fatherhood is central to the construction of his relationship with his daughters. In this sense, Jemurah thinks that "he wouldn't be the same father, she knew, if he had stayed in Jordan and raised them there. His removal was part of that soft grieving light behind his eyes and part of the recklessness of his laugh" (98). This internal monologue sheds light on Matussem's in-betweenness as an Arab immigrant in America and his ongoing process of negotiation as a man and, of course, as a father. In this context, his daughters have grown up listening to the stories he tells them, and that he calls "instructional stories." Jem even refers to her father as "Shahrazad, giving life" (99) through his storytelling. Matussem "populated America with figures from his childhood stories. Jem thought it sharpened his focus on the world" (98).

Matussem here can stand for Abu-Jaber's father as the writer has often mentioned his storytelling: "My father and my uncles are all great storytellers, and they regaled us with jokes, fables and reminiscences about their growing-up years. And that storytelling, along with food, was one of the great pillars of my own cultural education" (Field 2006: 221). Likewise, Matussem's stories play an important role in his daughters' cultural education. Abu-Jaber is switching roles at this point in particular as she charges the father with the task of performing an inter-generational cultural transmission, which is normally dedicated to a female figure like a mother, for example. In this context, Karen E. Rowe argues that "fairy tales are not simply tales told by fairies; implicitly

they are tales told by women, [...] who link once again the craft of spinning with the art of telling fated truths” (63). In this way, Elaine Showalter highlights how women’s fiction has formed a tradition of female writing and how these women writers “were the links in the chain that bound one generation to the next,” creating “the continuities in women’s writing” (7).<sup>28</sup> In this case, however, it is the father, a male figure, who is guaranteeing generational continuity.

One of the stories that Matussem always tells the girls is about “Za’enti da’ar the beauty of the house,” which is about a woman who “sit upstairs in her bedroom window and look down on everyone. ‘I so goddamn beautiful!’ she think. ‘They all look like ants from here!’ she think.” One day, the house is on fire; and while all the members of the family are trying to escape, Za’enti da’ar remains in her window refusing to leave:

Her hair just above the fires. All they yell to her, they yell, ‘Za’enti da’ar! Za’enti da’ar! Come down here, you crazy ass.’ And stuff like that. Only she don’t listen. No way, unhun. And you know why –”  
“Because she was Za’enti da’ar,” Melvie and Jem would say.  
“That’s right. She is beauty-of-the-House. And she says to them. ‘No way, you must be crazy. I am beauty of these house. I don’t care if it is on fire, you don’t get me out in the street.’ And so, because she Za’enti da’ar, she burned up completely. They could hear her screaming out in the streets, aieehhaaa!” The girls would already have their hands over their ears. (Abu-Jaber 1993: 96-97)

The story is thus about a girl’s obsession with her physical beauty which ends up causing her death in a tragic way. She prefers to burn alive than to leave her house. Matussem uses this story, for instance, when one of the girls hesitates to join him in one of his outings, and he tells her “Come, Za’enti da’ar! Don’t take so long!” (98).

Matussem’s stories are a combination of his childhood memories and fairy tales, together with his own experience in Jordan as well as in America. Such a collage of remixed stories is what Homi Bhabha calls “an insurgent act of cultural translation,”

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<sup>28</sup> Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977. Print.

which is created because “the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present” (Bhabha 1995: 7). One of the purposes of Matussem’s storytelling is his search for a way to keep live his cultural memory and, therefore, the Arab part of his cultural identity. In this context, he attributes some Jordanian names to people in his American entourage. For example, he calls the woman who screams a lot “Yasmin Al-Hassan,” which is a name that comes from a real character from his memories in Jordan. Hence, Jem considers that these are her father’s “childhood friends; if Matussem recognized them everywhere, this country couldn’t be such a foreign place after all” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 98).

In my view, Matussem uses these stories in order to recreate his cultural identity and lessen his alienation through making American more familiar to him, although he states that “nothing get you ready for real America!” (98), this country which turns to be absolutely different from the one of the movies. As a matter of fact, “the enchantment of America had eventually drawn him across an ocean” (99). However, he has moved to a country where he is doomed to face prejudices and displacement, where his in-laws reject him for being an Arab, and where his boss refers to him as “the dirty sand nigger” (99). As a consequence, Matussem tries to substitute this ugly face of America with his own version of it based on his fantasies of the New World which have motivated him to leave Jordan, and also on his attempt to reconcile both worlds he belongs to.

His complex relationship with the Arab homeland explains the feelings that have surfaced in his last trip to Jordan when he realizes that he is “in the wrong place, that he never would be at home here” (263). Indeed, Matussem does not want Jordan to be his daughters’ home either, in order to spare them the social and gender constraints that have shaped his sisters’ lives. Abu-Jaber, therefore, portrays Matussem as the opposite image of the commonly known stern and rigid Arab father. He is rather portrayed as an

understanding father who has established a very friendly relationship with his daughters. It is true that just after Jemorah's twentieth birthday, he "brought home friends from work, anyone from the head of oncology to the guy who managed the used-car lot down the street. All Arabs, all fifty years old at least," but then he soon "told the aunts that Jem had decided to become an old maid and stay with her father" (11). Hence, Matussem does not allow Fatima to influence him with her obsession to find Arab husbands for the girls, because he simply opposes her traditional views of women. In this respect, he thinks that he "would never throw them into unwanted marriage" (178), because he does not believe in the tradition of arranged marriages. He himself married Nora out of love, which is why he wants Jem and Melvie to also have the opportunity to choose their partners.

Matussem's opinion about a possible love affair between Jem and an old classmate of hers is an obvious illustration of the last idea. Gil Sesame declares his love to an indifferent Jemorah and tries to convince her to become his lover and move to Utah with him. She tells her father about the young man's courtship and that she does not understand his "sudden passion" towards her. So Matussem takes her hands and tells her, "With love, there no reason. Tell me about these Gilbo Sesamoon, he good boy?" Then he overtly encourages her to go with him if she loves him:

He wants to take you to Utah, right? There desert out there and big skies...

Why not try it? What's the hurt? Believe me, sometimes I don't know why I move to these balls-freezer place. Only your mother can get me to stay in these refrigerator. So why stick here? These way you will get warmed up and get a man all in one time, and Aunt Fatima will get off my neck, too. Don't think she isn't going to drag some ghoul out the family closet right now for you to marry. (38-39)



Here, Matussem is encouraging his daughter to rebel against Arab traditions and release herself from her aunt's pressure. He believes that love can transcend all kinds of obstacles and differences like it did before with him and Nora.

Matussem raises no objections to a possible relationship between Jemorah and an American man, which is not very common among Arab fathers. This point is stressed by Louise Cainkar who writes that "marriage of a Palestinian Muslim woman to a non-Arab, especially a non-Muslim Arab, is highly frowned upon by the entire Palestinian community regardless of social class" (1994: 94). While Cainkar's study focuses mainly on the Muslim Palestinian community in America, the rejection of unions between Arab women and non-Arab men is valid within the Arab community as a whole, whether with Muslim or Christian backgrounds. However, Arab American parents encourage their children to attend the community's social events which offer the opportunity for them to find potential spouses.

In my opinion, Matussem's rejection of this Arab tradition is highly significant because it reveals his intention to do away with restrictive and rigid mores forced on Arab women, while Arab men are generally spared. In this context, Cainkar asserts that Palestinian men, and Arab men in general, "are allowed to date European-Americans, spend nights out of the home, even live with U. S. women they are not married to. And while most Palestinian families would prefer their sons to marry another Palestinian Muslim, marriages outside the ethnic groups are accepted" (1994: 95). Hence, Matussem longs to set his daughters free from the sexist traditions of his Arab culture, because what really matters for him is his daughters' happiness and their capacity to make decisions by themselves about their future.

As I see it, Matussem is the model of the Arab American father that Abu-Jaber is celebrating in her novel, a free-spirited and understanding father who imposes no

gender restrictions on his daughters. She suggests the need of Arab Americans to be conscious about the reality of their lives in the New World, as Matussem is through his attempts to reconcile his new life in America with the type of masculinity he had learnt earlier in the Arab homeland. In this negotiation, he tries to do away with the traditional patriarchal nature of Arab fatherhood through challenging the Old World's assumptions of the subservience of women. Therefore, he struggles in America to find an in-between space for his daughters allowing them to enjoy the positive aspects offered by both cultures they are linked to.

As we can see, Matussem has chosen America to be a home for him and his family, as it is the land of his two passions, his wife and jazz. His interest in Jazz starts just after Nora's death and his search for "something to help the pulse of grief in his throat, in his hands" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 239). Playing drums is a hobby which helps him survive his loss and partially fill up the void left by his wife. Hence, Jazz allows him to build a bridge to communicate with Nora,

His sense of loss was sometimes so potent that he became disoriented. His need to drum grew sharp as a knife cut; he tapped and shuffled behind his desk. He made his secretaries nervous, and visitors to his office would stay for only the briefest sessions until his tapping became too much. Matussem's daughters, Jemorah and Melvina, could tell when he was napping – not just feigning sleep to eavesdrop – because his feet would start jerking rhythmically. (1-2)

Thus, jazz emerges as the major element which compensates Matussem for his feelings of loss as well as displacement, which derives from the very nature of this musical genre originating from African American work songs and spirituals which were deeply rooted expressions of their communal life. In this context, Stephen Matterson writes that "jazz properly begins in New Orleans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and its immediate roots are in African American musical traditions, both religious such as the SPIRITUAL, and secular, such as the work song" (113). One of the ancestors of Jazz is the blues which

lies at the core of the jazz tradition, being the expression of loss, sorrow and displacement in the slave experience. For Matussem, jazz is a kind of refuge enabling him to bridge distances with his deceased wife and express his great love towards her. Drumming has a healing effect on him as it helps him alleviate his pain. In this way, he has learnt gradually to live with this sense of loss. Jazz, therefore, provides the possibility for their love story to carry on and to acquire an infinite dimension, and drumming is like an offering that he gives to this love. When he sits down to drum he says, “this go out to my wife, this go out for myself” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 240).

On the other hand, jazz allows Matussem to connect with his childhood memories as he remembers the drummer of his village back in Jordan,

a vagrant who pounded at hide-covered drums with his hands at sunup and sundown. He had gone to weddings, funerals and births; the other men would sit with him, overturn pots and kettles and drum with three fingers and the heel of their palms, singing, the women ululating their high voices into the desert. The memory of singing mingled with his memories of the Muslim muezzin, caught like a princess in the tower of the mosque. (239-40)

It seems that one of the effects of drumming on Matussem is to make him feel a certain sense of community directly connected with his childhood memories in Jordan. Drumming there is related to social gatherings where people are happily having fun and celebrating. Moreover, it reminds him of the coexistence between Muslim and Christian people over there. Although Matussem is not Muslim, he still remembers the muezzin’s call for prayer. He even tries to imitate him once on a Saturday morning to his daughters’ astonishment, ““But you’re not even Muslim! Your family is Syrian Orthodox,” Melvie shouted. ‘The whole neighborhood can see you up there chanting prayers. Someday you’re going to fall off that roof and *break your back*” (355). This musical memory related to drumming and also to Muslim religious chanting makes Matussem link music to spirituality transcending in this way any physical or external

restrictions. In fact, this strong sense of community is also applicable to his current life in America.

Despite being an American musical genre, jazz allows Matussem to use a traditional Arab instrument – the drum – related to his childhood musical memory to play American music, which is in harmony with jazz's transcultural nature. Hence, this is true to the essence of jazz, as this uniquely American art form is the result of the fusion of two great musical traditions in the United States, the European and the African. In addition, jazz translates the fact of bridging the gap between what are considered high and low cultures. This tolerant fusing spirit of Jazz continues to unite people across the divides of race, religion and national boundaries as it is put into practice through "The Big Band Sound of Mat Ramoud and the Ramoudettes," the Jazz band which brings together Matussem and some American friends from his neighborhood. As Matterson explains, "for some writers, notably Ralph Ellison, the Jazz band has been used as an image of an ideal community, in which individual expression is encouraged but which also exists within a group framework" (113). In this way, jazz creates an unlimited space for Matussem to celebrate his negotiated self as a member of the American community. Moreover, it provides him with the strength he needs to challenge death and carry on after the loss of his wife. This music is the means through which he expresses his need to "[look] ahead at every moment. Going forward meant that he was still alive; he pushed against jazz; drumming was living" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 187).

Apart from being Matussem's song of life, jazz becomes a means to make ethnic particularity reach beyond its own boundaries. Being a musical and emotional language of communication, it provides a middle ground between his Arab heritage and the music of America, becoming in this way a site for Matussem's negotiation of his Arab

American identity as a man as well as a father. Suhair Majaj states that “the novel turns in its final passage to a metaphor for Jazz, positing cultural cross-over and improvisation as an alternative to unitary identification” (2000: 332). Thus, Abu-Jaber ends her novel with a cross-cultural dialogue composed of the sounds of “Jazz and trills of Arabic music” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 374) with Matussem playing his own version of American jazz, which is obviously Arabian jazz. In this sense, jazz begins as a reference to black music and then becomes Arab. This idea reveals again Abu-Jaber’s intention to extend links with the African American community and, hence, her focus on racialization as a perspective to approach her Arab American characters. After studying Matussem’s patterns of identification as an Arab father in America, now I will focus on his daughters’ process of self construction as first-generation Arab American women.

### **3.1.4 The sisters: The Nurse and the Dreamer**

Early in *Arabian Jazz*, Melvina asks her sister Jemorah to remember a Bedouin saying: “In the book of life, every page has two sides” (6). The “two sides” are actually multiple sets of two sides consisting of two cultures, two families, two identities, and two languages. All of these elements proceed jointly in order to give shape to the girls’ performance as young Arab American women in the American context. From an early age, the two sisters have been claimed by these two backgrounds due to their upbringing in an atmosphere characterized by its double allegiance. Again, we can trace here the author’s own experience as she grew up listening to conflicting versions about her identity. His father used to remind her that she was fully Arab. However, some paternal relatives called her “the light one” because of her pale skin and green eyes. As she explains:

Growing up, I was given very mixed messages... I had my father, who said, "This is absolutely who you are." Then I had all these people who were extended family – and also in the Arab community – saying, "No, no, no. This is much better. You want to look American; you want to be American." It was very confusing.<sup>29</sup>

Jem and Melvie have lived similar circumstances, which further complicates their journey towards self identification.

As an example of that, just before the Ramoud's trip to Jordan, they receive a visit from Fatima and her husband Zaeed. The aunt, true to form, looks at nine-year-old Jem and baby Melvie, and "murmured in English, 'Beautiful! Beautiful babies! Pure as water. You come back to home soon, come back to Old Country, marry the handsome Arab boys and make for us grandsons!'" (77). Fatima's exclamation implies that according to her, her nieces' home is Jordan where they are supposed to end up marrying Arab husbands. She asserts the girls' Arabness and, therefore, expects them to lean towards the Arab side. However, Nora, the mother, has a different perception of things, as revealed through her reaction to Fatima's comment:

Nora's lips tightened to a streak. She stood and left the room... Later at night, Nora bent over the girls, tucking them in. "Your home is here. Oh, you will travel, I want you to. But you always know where your home is." The ends of her straight, long hair brushed their faces, its bright red fringes swinging and making sparks. Soon they would be flying to the moon to visit their other family. (78)

Nora perceives Jordan as somewhere very remote but which is always present just like "the moon." She wants her daughters to make a journey back to their Arab origins to know their father's homeland and extended family. On the other hand, she 134tress134s their Americanness, as she believes that they belong to America and that they have to

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<sup>29</sup> Curiel, Jonathan. "An Arab American Writer Seeks Her Identity." *San Francisco Chronicle*. May 24, 2004.  
<<http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/An-Arab-American-writer-seeks-her-identity-2773799.php>>

identify themselves with it accordingly. It seems that she wants them to observe their father's culture without getting involved in it, because she cannot imagine the possibility that they might return to what Matussem has left behind.

During this same trip to Jordan, Jem and Melvie witness the divergence between Nora and Matussem's sisters. Due to his wife's "insist[ence] that silent baby Melvina would surely cry all night," Matussem declines his sisters' invitation and rents an apartment for their stay there. This seems to upset Matussem's sisters who have expected them to be accommodated in the family's house. "'*Amerkani*,' the aunts, who'd borne thirty eight babies between the six of them, said to each other. 'Too good to stay with us!'" (78). Hence, Nora's aim to maintain a certain distance from her husband's family has engendered their disapproval, which reveals a kind of clash between two different concepts of family, the nuclear and the extended one. Moreover, this divergence indicates different notions of privacy and domesticity: Nora comes from the nuclear family tradition of white culture, where the extended family has increasingly come to be considered an artifact of the past, whereas in Matussem's homeland, the extended family network still has a strong presence, as people there have a familistic orientation towards life.

In this way, from an early age, Jem and Melvie have witnessed the cultural collisions between their mother and aunts. These mixed messages have placed the girls very early on the cultural borderline, provoking a sense of ambivalence in their process of self identification as Arab American women in the United States. The ambivalence of this ongoing process is enhanced by the mother's death. This traumatic experience, which occupies a central position in the novel, has a deep impact on the two sisters' patterns of identification. However, the trauma of their mother's death acts differently in the forging of the personality of both of them. In addition, the difference between

twenty-nine-year-old Jem and twenty-two-year-old Melvie is delineated in their very names. In this context, Mazen Naous states that “‘Jemorah’ is a transliteration of the Arabic word meaning ‘live coal’ (Baalbaki, 430)<sup>30</sup> and ‘Melvina’ is a name of Irish origin. The sisters’ names derive from their parents’ cultural backgrounds: Arab and Irish American” (63).<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the existence of Jem and Melvie in itself symbolizes this union between the Arab and the American sides. On the other hand, they have different perceptions of what it means to be Arab American, reflected in each one’s struggle to straddle both cultures she belongs to and to find a place for herself in America. Moreover, the two sisters have opposite characters. While Jemorah emerges as a silent dreamer lacking self-confidence and auto-esteem, Melvina is realist and highly determined.

Melvina’s peculiar character is strongly affected by her mother’s absence. In this sense, her personality is the outcome of her early childhood memories, and particularly the vague distant moments that she, as a two-year-old baby, has lived with her mother. Her imagination is constantly reproducing the night when her mother dies: “She had met with death personally. When she was two and a half she’d sat up in her crib in her parents’ bedroom in Jordan and watched it come in through the window” (178). Melvie pretends that, despite her age at that moment, she still remembers every single second of that night when she sees death coming to take her mother off, as it “cascaded through the air in a veil, like the ones that flew around belly dancers, a veil like Salome’s. It turned over and over, tumbling in folds over their heads as Melvina kept watch” (178). At that moment, she learns “instinctively, inarticulately, that death came to people in

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<sup>30</sup> Baalbaki, Rohi, ed. *Al-Mawrid: A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary*. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm LilMalayin, 1997.

<sup>31</sup> Naous, Mazen. “Arabian Jazz and the Need for Improvising Arab Identity in the U.S.” *MELUS*. Volume 34, Number 4 (Winter 2009).



personal guises: one would see a fly where another saw a fish or a star. This veil, she understood, would be the way death revealed itself to her” (178).

Triggered by her helplessness to do anything to prevent death from taking off her mother, she decides to become a nurse. She explains that “from that night on she knew she was called to pursue the greatest of professions, the most physically, emotionally, and intellectually demanding of any field, the most misunderstood and martyred, the closest to divinity: nurse” (178-79). Therefore, this traumatic experience has led her to establish her identity as “all nurse” (13) who is regarded at the hospital where she works as “the dedicated life-saving nurse” (Chérif 2003: 217). This identification with her profession makes her totally absorbed by the hospital space to such an extent that it dominates many details of her personal life. For instance, at the age of fifteen she attends “both high school and her first full-time year of nursing school.” Even days off from school, she is used to wearing “spotless white slacks and white blouse, more or less identical to those she wore at work” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 31).

Melvie’s devotion to her job makes her a full-time nurse whether at hospital or outside. This is reflected, for instance, in her relationship with the heroin addict Larry Fasco whom she provides with methadone from the hospital to help him ease his addiction. Acting here like a “healer and killer” (Chérif 2003: 217) at the same time, the fact that she is the one who gives him the drugs ensures her control of the situation. In this way, in her personal involvement with people she remains in her role of nurse. Even her relationship with her sister and father follows this pattern as not only is she concerned with their behavior but also she feels responsible for their well-being. She shows her concern about her father’s health, for example, before a trip to Jordan,

The day before she’d given her father diet cards with long lists of foods he was not, under any circumstances, to touch. She’d also given him a paramedic’s first-aid kit, full of things like surgical thread and booster shots for malaria, hepatitis, and typhus – especially typhus. (265)

Melvina's identification of herself with her profession can be explained through the following statement by Julia Kristeva concerning the relationship between the foreigner and work:

You will recognize a foreigner in that he still considers work as a value. A vital necessity, to be sure, his sole means of survival, on which he does not necessarily place a halo of glory but simply claims as a primary right, the zero degree of dignity. Even though some, once their minimal needs are satisfied, also experience an acute pleasure in asserting themselves in and through work: as if it were the chosen soil, the only source of possible success. (17-18)

While I do not consider Melvina a foreigner, I think that Kristeva's idea can be applied to this case, taking into account the girl's background as the daughter of an Arab father and an American mother. Melvina's devotion to her job is her passport to American society. Through her ambition and enthusiasm, she is meant to stand for the symbol of the American dream in this novel, since although she is only twenty-two years old, she is already the hospital's head nurse, and a very successful one that. She has gained a lot of respect thanks to her commitment and efforts,

The staff in her hospital and the hospital community at large knew and respected her and honored her commands. Doctors consulted her as a matter of course. Patients and their families sent her flowers, chocolates, even jewelry – which she promptly returned, not wishing to appear compromised. (Abu-Jaber 1993: 179)

Melvina's dedication to fight death and save lives has developed in her an obsession with control and order. She has created a "robotic character" (Kaldas 2006: 180) expressed on the surface by rationality, strength, determination, and power, which is rather a façade or a mask to conceal the sense of loss and ambivalence she suffers from, mainly as a consequence of her mother's death.

While Melvina struggles to alleviate her father's grief in order to stop him from falling apart, and to back her sister to get a new life out of the hospital and Euclid, she tries to remain in control, being the only rational individual in a family of dreamers. It seems that she has no choice but to behave differently due to the role she is doomed to play. She is responsible for taking care of her family, and for that she needs strength. In fact, "her expression was so penetrating that Fatima was once moved to say that Melvie had 'never looked like a girl.'" In this context, her sister claims that "Melvina had been making herself into that woman for as long as Jem could remember" (12). Hence, her personality has allowed her to be aware of her dual sense of belonging as she seems to have a clearer image of herself and of the borderland territory where she is situated, while her sister has been hesitating between which of those two territories to jump into. Much of this awareness stems from her identification as "a nurse not just some person" (179), which puts her out of reach in relation to both cultures. She is the one who decides what to appreciate and what to criticize, what to take and what to reject, because she seems to stand at the same distance from her Arab and American sides.

As an example of that, Melvie does not hesitate to criticize Arab culture and challenge her aunt Fatima's attempts to reconstruct the Arab homeland's gendered memory through her nieces. She calls into question the traditional matchmaking that she considers "human sacrifices" practiced by Fatima and her friends who, according to her, are "feeding their virgins to their raging gods of macho domination and chronic dissipation. And that means *us*" (51). For that reason, she incites her sister to attach no importance to her aunt's insistence that she is in marriage emergency. Melvie gives voice to her determination when she asks her sister to "give no quarter and take no enemies. Take liberty or death and nothing in between!" (47).

The clash between Fatima and Melvie reaches its climax during the welcoming party in honor of the visiting Jordanian archbishop. The niece overhears a conversation between her aunt and some friends about the circumstances of Nora's death. Fatima reveals unfriendly sentiments towards her defunct sister-in-law who "doesn't get the vaccine, these is how! Who get typhus anymore? And die in one night, boom? Nobody but for silly tourists who don't get their shots and come to Jordan to show how superior they are!" (66). Fatima obviously considers Nora an arrogant tourist who looks down on her husband's Arab family. Melvina is shocked by her aunt's interpretation of her mother's passing away, which is actually a central issue still casting a shadow over the lives of her family. Her reaction to Fatima's comments is rather violent,

"Excuse me, but what were you saying just now?" Melvie asked Fatima, fists on her hips. Estrelia tried to wave Melvie away, but the confrontation thrilled Fatima; gin was boiling through her, mingling with a hundred grievances and irritations. Zaeed was up on the dance floor with Amy; there was nothing to constrain Fatima; she was free. Soaring on a hot wind of anger, she shouted, "Your mother dies on because she hates Arabs!"

Melvina slapped her so hard that Fatima spilled out of her chair. (66)

Fatima seems to blame Nora for her own death as she thinks that she has died of typhus in Jordan on purpose in order to make Arabs look bad. Melvina's response is violent when she slaps her aunt's face to punish her and to protect her mother's memory. Her behavior in itself reflects her indifference towards Arab traditions, and here in particular that of respect for one's elders.

However, Melvina is absolutely loyal to her family which is, as we have seen, her second priority after her profession. For her, "after the family there was little room over for anyone else." In this respect, Jem says that her sister is "apt to call anyone who was not at least a second cousin twice-removed criminal" (33). This devotion is concentrated on her Arab family, taking into account the fact that the Ramouds have not

been in contact with their American relatives since Nora's death. This tight relationship with this part of the family places her in close contact with her Arab background. In this sense, Melvie cannot deny her appreciation of many sides of her Arab heritage. For instance, she

thought of Arabic as the tongue of the heart, of irrational, un-American passions, of pinching and kisses covering both cheeks. Tongues could climb Arabic syllable over syllable like fingers ascending piano keys, enabling great crescendos of screaming. Arabic represented to Melvie the purest state of emotional energy. (304)

Therefore, as a hyphenated individual, Melvie identifies with some particular cultural markers related to her ancestors' homeland. It seems that she has found her own formula of negotiation to come to terms with her double heritage, which enables her to enjoy both sides of the hyphen. In this sense, she appreciates many elements from her Arab background, but she keeps the option to criticize it and also to adjust it to her American home. Hence, Melvie seems to be the only member of her family who is not affected by the values and traditions of the Old Country. She has succeeded in finding a certain balance to the hyphen linking Arabness to Americanness.

Melvina is very American in the way she is extremely identified with her profession which is a crucial part of her life; and she is happy with it. She is an independent woman who is not ready to give up her freedom whether for cultural or sentimental motives, hence her interest in motorcycles:

Melvina, despite her appreciation of law and order, couldn't help a sneaking admiration of bikes. She had a sense that with a twitch of fate, it might have been her on a Harley, perhaps glued to the back of some disposable man as she'd seen many of the women; hair fluttering under their helmets, molding their bodies to the momentum, closer than a marriage vow. What was more interesting to her, though, was the thought of mounting her own engine. (281-82)

Melvina's interest in Harley-Davidson motorcycles, an icon of American culture, is noteworthy as it reinforces the delineation of her character as an independent American woman.

The experience of riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle in American culture has always been a symbol of freedom and mobility. In this respect, back in the 1970's, Harley-Davidson's advertising campaign presented its product as "The Great American Freedom Machine." This image "is also ideal for defining what a Harley-Davidson means for riders of almost any time and any place...a motorcycle signified speed and speed signified freedom" (Dregni 1998: 51). Therefore, Melvina is attracted to the experience of riding in the wind as she even longs to possess her own motorcycle. She does not need a man to ride it for her because she can do it on her own. The image of Melvina riding a Harley summarizes the girl's personality as well as her principles, implying being true to her nature as an independent woman who lives her life according to her own rules and who is ready to remove all kinds of constraints that could prevent her from being herself.

However, the process of identity negotiation undergone by her sister Jemorah is totally different. The latter's struggle with her double identity is more complex as she emerges as a twenty-nine-year old woman who feels suspended between both sides of the hyphen. As Alice Evans comments, Jem is "someone who is trying to fight through what she's been told she is" (45).<sup>32</sup> She seems to be "not quite at home in either her Arab or her American contexts" (Majaj 2000: 332), which illustrates her displacement in both cultural spaces. Consequently, Jem finds herself involved in a struggle in order to find a space of her own and compensate herself after twenty-nine years, as according

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<sup>32</sup> Evans, Alice. "Half-and-Half: A Profile of Diana Abu-Jaber." *Poets and Writers Magazine*. Vol. 24, 4. 1996. Print.

to her own words, “everything in her past seemed doused in gloomy work and dark winters” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 29).

From the beginning of the novel, Jem seems still and indifferent as she cannot be bothered to make any effort to move forward in life. The same hospital that provides meaning and happiness in Melvina’s life plays the role of a prison in that of her sister, confining her in a meaningless job that she neither likes nor identifies with. In spite of that, she does not initially let her sister convince her to study at university. This situation marked by a deep sense of loss makes Jem unable to locate herself and figure out who she is, which creates a kind of void that she constantly tries to fill up with memories of her deceased mother. She is haunted by these childhood memories, so much so that she is living her life through them. Her mother’s death is like a barrier preventing her from getting out of the bubble where she has locked herself up. She is not even at ease with her inner self because she still has issues pending to come to terms with, like facing the real world, on the one hand, and finding a way to reconcile the two components of her mixed identity, on the other.

Meanwhile, Jemorah appears as a fragile and silent dreamer lacking self-confidence and living through a traumatic memory. Like her father and sister, the girl’s life is affected by the loss of Nora when she is only nine years old. As I have commented before, Jem is constantly trying to remember her mother and make sense of her death. Hence, she is haunted by the recurrent memory of that crucial night of her life when “her mother’s hand turn[ed] from hot to cold in her own” (86). The little girl “had been awakened by her mother’s breathing. It was ragged, vibrating through her. Jem went to her parents’ room, drawn by the rattling, and she was shocked that her father could lie asleep next to this woman who lay turning into stone” (78). While Matussem

is sleeping, Jem together with her sister witness the passing away of their mother, which has given shape to this trauma translated into a deep sense of loss.

This feeling reaches such an extent that “a week after Nora’s death, Jem began to wonder if her mother had ever been real, or if she was just a sweet story that Jem had told herself” (81). Therefore, the girl connects her mother’s memory with fairy tales as she starts to think of her mother as a story and even creates a myth out of it as a way to replace reality:

In Jordan the pleasures of the familiar were gone... Her mother was also there, her memory residing in the steepening streets. She was a jinni, whose real activity Jem could scarcely remember, less a memory than a presence who might fly out from any crook or corner, perhaps from the tubs of corn and butter vendors carried on muleback. (81)

Her inability to properly remember her mother makes her live her pain in silence. She tries to gather her fragmented memories about Nora, and creates a world of her own dominated by her invented narrative about her mother. Her silence even bothers Melvina, who accuses her sister of denying her access to their mother’s memory by preventing her from knowing about Nora’s life. She confronts Jem saying, “You never tell me about her, you never talk about her, it’s as if you’re trying to punish me for something.” She continues, “It’s as if she were your personal secret. Like you want to keep her all to yourself” (191).

At this very moment, Jem recognizes that “she had lacked of courage” (191) to face the pain that has transformed her life into an unbearable existence to the point that she “sometimes felt that the disease should have carried her off with her mother” (79). Hence, the girl questions the meaning of her own life without her mother as it is dominated by “the scent of absence” (86). This burden leads her to escape reality and find refuge in her own world where fragmented memories coexist with stories and mythical creatures. I would suggest that Jem’s situation matches Edward Said’s



description of exile when he says that “Much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule... The exile’s new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction” (2001, 181).<sup>33</sup> The girl’s world of stories comes into existence just after her mother’s death, at the moment when “Jem felt like she was living inside the Waterbabies tale that her maternal grandmother used to read to her – fairy-children like mermaids swept along the world’s current. She swam in loss” (Abu-Jaber1993: 80).

In this imaginative world, we find the gas station attendant Ricky Ellis, Jem’s half-Onondagan lover, whom she has known since her childhood. She knows him from her daily silent school bus rides when she quietly remains in her seat contemplating the scenery from the bus window. On these trips, her eyes are mostly attracted by this boy who is “a neighbor from one of the ‘bad’ families that Fatima talked about” (33). She sees him everyday sitting in front of the local candy shop with a group of boys at whom the school kids shout “Go to school, scumbags!” (34). There is an inner force which catches Jem’s attention and makes her stare at the strange silent boy through the bus window, until one day,

As usual, none of the boys even bothered to look at the bus. Jem was staring at Ricky; the bus took the gravel road at such a crawl it wasn’t hard to spend some time looking. He was hunched up, black hair stiff with grease falling over his face. Then, for the first time ever, she saw his face turn, parting the curtain of his hair, and recognition shook her. She’d expected eyes that had seen violence and death... But his eyes were steady, drawing her into their gaze. (35)

Jem here is so amazed by Ricky’s gaze that she starts to associate him with the “demigods and fabulous beasts” of her ancient mythology class. She identifies him with her favorite mythic creature whose “upper parts [are] those of a boy, the lower those of

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<sup>33</sup> Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. London: Granta, 2001.

a goat. It played pipes, haunting the forest with music that was a thing of the heart of the body rather than the ears” (35).

Abu-Jaber here makes reference to Greek mythology through relating Ricky to satyrs, the mythological creatures who are part man and part goat. Described as the “spirits of the woodland,” they were “fond of wine and women. They were the attendants of Dionysus” (Ellis 1895: 125), the god of wine. Moreover, “they seemed to personify the unrestrained fertility of Nature in the wild; and what they particularly enjoyed was pursuing the nymphs, on whom they hoped to gratify their lust” (Grant and Hazel, 297). The animal attributes of satyrs reflect the way in which these creatures embody the wild forces of nature, in addition to their wicked reputation due to their passion towards females. This image seems to be compatible with Ricky’s character; he is depicted as mysterious, wild and also fond of Jem. In addition to that, the girl could stand for the figure of Antiope, the wife of Lycus, king of Thebes, who was seduced by Zeus, disguised as a satyr.

As we can see, Jem’s romantic depiction of Ricky reveals that, like Antiope, the girl is seduced by this mysterious boy. This attraction translates Jem’s identification with him as she is the one at whom children shout and tease inside the school bus, while he is her counterpart outside the vehicle. Therefore, both of them coincide in being the subject of children’s hostility and mockery, which makes Jem feel solidarity with the boy despite the absence of any kind of conversation between them. It is interesting to note here that both characters interact on the margin of ethnic boundaries. Jem and Ricky have a hybrid background, and both are orphans, since Ricky’s father has blown himself up trying to supercharge a car at a gas station. In both cases, it is the American half of the parentage which has died prematurely. This ironically seems to be, in a way, self-inflicted, through inattention. Thus, violence and sudden loss seem to have inflicted

the initial subjective wound on both characters' process of progressive identification. In this context, Ricky "had too many stepmothers; he was dumped by his father's absence, by years of aimlessness and television" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 167).

Paradoxically, we learn later that the whole story of the father's loss is actually an invented one, "Ricky Ellis, the homeless boy, the orphan boy. He smiled because he'd made it all up. His father had survived, ridiculously, several bouts of drinking toxic chemicals. His mother was long gone" (272-73). In fact, it is Ricky's Indian mother who has actually disappeared. It seems that he intentionally intends to eradicate the image of his American father from his life through hiding his survival. The denial of the American father's existence is actually a denial of his American half, which reflects the complexity of the ethnic boundaries situation where Ricky finds himself.

Ten years later, Jem meets again the "one-time disturber of her dreams" (275) after finishing school. This time, it is not in front of the candy shop but in the town's garage where he temporarily works as an attendant; and immediately complicity between them comes to the surface again. Slipping back at first into their old habit of exchanging glances, they then start to exchange words, and go on to meet quietly in Jem's car or in the fields. They become lovers. Just like the faun she has dreamed about as a child, Ricky emerges from the woods behind the Ramouds' house where "he had watched her, settling himself among the leaves and mossy earth by the house, more often than she would ever guess" (275). After their first encounter, he finds the young woman on the lawn of her house and "he walked up through the fields, and laid his head in Jem's lap. He did it without speaking, and Jem let him" (156). He tells her how much he has missed her and then starts singing,

The sound was eerie, elegiac, climbing the bones of her legs back to her spine, the song bound the rhythm of weeping... What was remarkable about this singing was the purity of his voice, going true to every note

and giving it flight. The sound of a faun, Jem thought, or panpipes. She'd never heard anything like it before. (156)

Jemorah is seduced and even enchanted by Ricky's. Not only does she perceive him as a mythological creature but also as the projection of her romantic dreams.

As we can see, these two characters made invisible in their community find a source of comfort in the way they identify with one another. Thus, interaction and solidarity between the young Arab American woman and the half-Indian man forms a kind of interethnic communalism as both of them are subject of marginalization within their community, in Euclid. As Salaita points out, "although they never solidify a relationship, their intercourse symbolizes the entrance of one ethnic movement into the fold of another. The intercommunication provides comfort amid surroundings where Arab and Indian are often represented as being subhuman" (2001: 436).

Hence, the interaction between Jem and Ricky illustrates Abu-Jaber's transcendence of ethnic boundaries through the creation of a minority discourse where not only do Arab Americans take part but also interact with other marginalized characters. On the one hand, the writer aims to reinforce her narrative within its American context by means of this interethnic communalism, which is in harmony with Arab American scholars' tendency to cross ethnic lines and communicate with other communities of color in the United States as a strategy to reinforce their own position as a group. This identification is well expressed by Ricky when he tells Jemorah the following:

"... I guess that's how I love you, not knowing, just the way you were up there riding that school bus[...] You were the first person who saw me. I mean... I mean when you looked at me, I could *feel* it." He moved close to her and put his fingers on the nape of her neck under her hair, and she shivered. They shut their eyes together. "Tell me you still see me," he said, his voice descending to a whisper. (203)

The silent boy is given voice here, which allows him to reveal his feelings about the invisibility forced on him and how Jemora has been the first to recognize him as an ordinary human being and also to become interested in him as a man. And thus, Ricky and Jem, sharing the status of outcasts in the community, find refuge in each other.

On the other hand, Abu-Jaber uses the intercourse between these two characters in order to make an analogy between Palestinians and Native Americans. She explains that she “was searching for a long time for a metaphor for Palestinians that Americans could grasp in a visceral way,” taking into account that “this country can tend to be so isolated and so muffled from what’s happening outside of its borders.” That’s why she realizes that “the experiences of Native Americans were similar to what was happening to Palestinians, the way they were slowly phased out or pushed back, how there were moments of violence, but that native peoples were always constituted as savages and barbarians” (Evans 1996: 47-48). Hence, the writer draws attention to the similarities between the United States and Israel as colonial settler societies where European settler populations have gradually conquered their respective territories through the exercise of power to subdue and control the indigenous populations.

Therefore, Abu-Jaber intends to shed light on the violent displacement of indigenous peoples in order to make room for immigrants which took place in the United States, and which is still happening in Israel. Through this analogy, she contests the American position vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East consisting of full support for Israel at the expense of the Palestinians’ right to their own land. More importantly, she places Native Americans as colonized subjects in a country created out of a colonial settler society so as to draw attention to the current condition of the Palestinian people. In other words, the writer tries to implicitly explain the nature of this

kind of conflict and in this way inspire the American reader's compassion towards Palestinians.

From the other side, Ricky's association with Euclid's working-class community keeps him trapped in this stagnant town. He knows that he has no chance to leave for a new life as he is doomed to remain frozen in Euclid's "Absolute Present Tense" (Abu-Jaber 1993: 268). However, taking into account Jem's more stable middle-class situation and her ethnic background, he comes to the conclusion that something about her "made him know he did not belong with her" (167). He thinks that, unlike him, she is more likely to move forward and make a new life somewhere else. While he feels "the need to rise out of his life," he cannot do anything because he "could not understand himself. He'd had too many stepmothers; he was numbed by his father's absence, by years of aimlessness and television" (167). He seems to be forced into motionlessness, which is physically symbolized by his job, "Flat on his back under a car chassis looking into metal mazes, he could lose himself between the floor and the engine" (167).

Then, Ricky admits that the only way he and Jem can be together is when she remains in Euclid, which means that he would have to transmit his state of immobility to her. However, he knows that this is impossible as "Someday, he believed, she would wake from the house inside the trees, that house banked in bushes, weeds, and dark windows" (167). Once more, Abu-Jaber makes use of fairy tales in order to illustrate her characters' experiences and provide an insight into their behavior. In this case, she refers to Jemora as Sleeping Beauty falling into a state of a long deep sleep in her castle. Nevertheless, Ricky, standing for the Prince figure here, wishes to keep the princess asleep under his charm, as

If he breathed very quietly, though, touched her with the lightest fingers, if he sang to her, he thought, she might sink deeper into her sleep, the

sleep of Euclid. Perhaps she would stay with him, though he felt, deeper inside, that she would someday leave. (167)

Abu-Jaber here compares staying in Euclid to a curse whose effect is being forever trapped in a place lacking any sign of change and doomed to paralysis and stagnation.

In fact, Ricky's intuition turns out to be true because Jem realizes that her boyfriend has no chance of leaving Euclid, which is not her case. She thinks that,

She couldn't find a life here with Ricky Ellis, his job at a gas station, her work in a business office. She couldn't hide in Euclid and disappear... She wanted *more*; after so many years of holding back, losing herself in dreams. Her mother had left before she could show Jem where her place might be. Jem averted her eyes as if her sadness clung to the windshield. She would *not* let herself vanish. She would live. (299)

The reader is led to think that her decision is going to be strengthened by the two letters she finds later that day in the mailbox. The first one concerns her admission to the Department of Psychology of Stanford University, and the second contains a twenty-five-thousand-dollar check from her Jordanian uncle Fouad to cover her first year at University. However, in a demonstration of her deep ambivalence, she unexpectedly expresses her desire to fulfill her aunt's wish to marry her cousin Nassir and "go back with him to live in Jordan" (307). To the surprise of her family members and even her husband-to-be cousin, she explains that,

I'm tired to fight it out here. I don't have much idea of what it is to be Arab, but that's what the family is always saying we are. I want to know what part of me is Arab. I haven't figured out what part is our mother, either. It's like she abandoned us, left us alone to work it all out. (307-08)

Jemorah, here, voices her failure to find a home in America without her mother's presence.

In this way, Abu-Jaber reveals Jem's passiveness in the sense that she depends on others to define who she is. On the one hand, she is Arab because she is defined by

her family as such, and on the other, she complains about her mother's early death which has prevented her from enjoying her American part. Therefore, Jem intends to put an end to her struggle to find a balance and understand her hyphen. She explains her decision through the alienation she feels in America. She says that

Things are changing for me. I've started to see better, like the way I don't fit in. I haven't put together a life. I'm still living at home, I've been working at a job I hate. I'm so tired of being a child, being good, wanting people to like me. They don't like Arabs. (327-28)

Jemorah here complains that her American side of the hyphen has been constantly denied to her, which has added much trouble to her journey in search of who she is. She comes to the conclusion that "You've got to seem right" (328) to be considered American. She thinks that she doesn't look right, so she gives it all up and chooses Jordan as her home.

However, Melvina thoroughly disagrees with her sister and gives her instead a lecture about Americanness:

Americans don't like anybody! Americans don't like Americans! [...] And what are we talking about, you *are* an American. Where do you think Americans come from, when they're not captured on reservations? They come from other places. That's what an American is. (328)

Hence, Melvina declares herself, and therefore her sister and her family, to be American. She states that they are not less Americans than the others as she refers to the essence of America, the nation of emigrants. Nevertheless, Abu-Jaber intends to stress the ambivalence of this myth about America where probably only white people "seem right." Moreover, she makes reference to the struggle undergone by hyphenated individuals to grasp a place for themselves within America's multicultural space. In this way, she insists on the Americanness of her community and, therefore, takes a step



further towards the blending of Arab-Americanness in order to enhance its presence in its American context.

Returning to Jem's decision, the girl shows once more her persistent dependence on others to work it out for her. She wants to go to Jordan because it is where her mother has died. Realizing that, her cousin Nassir tries to open her eyes:

"But I think, maybe, you believe that because she died overseas that there's still some part of your mother, perhaps her soul, remaining in Jordan, waiting for you to come back again. Perhaps the home you're thinking of is in your mother's arms."

Jem rose, walked to the kitchen door, and tipped her forehead lightly to the screen. The air through the screen was cool and black, coming, it seemed, for great distances, the flesh of night shifting, great and lovely and empty.

"Because, dear, if that's what you feel, I have to tell you, I don't think you'll find her there," he said.

"No," Jem said. "Of course not." (340)

It is at this moment that Jem finally realizes that Nassir is right and that her mother is not in Jordan anymore, nor anywhere else. She is really and truly dead. It is definitely the first time that Jemora sees the truth clearly and understands that she has to accept it. It has been a long time since her mother's loss, so she has to face life and depend on herself.

Therefore, Jem shifts from one extreme decision to another when she makes up her mind once more to give up the idea of moving to Jordan and stay in America. She wants not only to get out of her inner world, but also out of the hospital's walls, to leave Euclid and get access to the real world:

She didn't think she would ever live there. The house looked strange as a shipwreck in a sea of country fields and telephone wires threading Euclid to the rest of the world. It could be for Matussem a private home, a place to create his life. But she has recognized [...] the mystery of this hate, something she could crack only by going into it: back to school. (362)

Jem decides, then, to move to California so as to pursue a degree course at Stanford University. She chooses America as her home in order to try to come to an end with her identity negotiation and her double sense of belonging. This quick and unexpected shift from one extreme position to another reveals, actually, that she has not really resolved her ambivalence. However, the definitive burial of Jem's mother in her mind has provided her with a fresh start as she decides to give America an opportunity to be the stage for her identity negotiation with the objective of reaching the point of being able to enjoy her transcultural identity.

*Arabian Jazz* (1993) therefore conveys Abu-Jaber's efforts to contribute to the "creation of a new culture that draws on both Arab and American contexts and identities" (Majaj 1994: 74). Making of hybridity the center of her narrative discourse, she gives us the possibility of looking into the multilayered identities of her Arab American female characters, and sheds light on the making of the Arab American female identity which is presented as a continuously negotiable conception of the self.

### ***3.2 West of the Jordan***

This novel presents a collection of female characters whose stories reflect the heterogeneity of Arab American women and the multiplicity of their experiences. Laila Halaby offers us the narratives of four teenage maternal cousins of Palestinian origin who undergo different experiences of displacement. The novel gives voice to these teenage girls as it assigns them the task of narrating the chapters and relating not only their own stories, but also the stories of many other people with different ages and backgrounds. This is "the way they tell their stories: slow and tasty... not rushing" (Halaby 2003: 1). Accordingly, the chapters emerge as first-person narratives of these

females cousins told in a cycle of voices, which makes reference to *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by the Chinese American writer Amy Tan. The similarities between both novels make us think about the short-story cycle, which has become a popular literary genre amongst ethnic minority writers from different backgrounds. In an intimate tone, each narrator in Halaby's novel introduces the reader to her own world and presents insights into her daily experiences as well as into her perception of life, home and many other themes. Each chapter is the site where the protagonists expose their identities-in-the-making, whether as Arab or Arab American women, taking into account the multiplicity of their personal, cultural and economic conditions and circumstances.

In spite of the diversity of the four cousins' experiences, they all find themselves in a Third Space where they struggle to find a place of their own in the Palestinian diaspora. Their location is what Homi Bhabha calls "the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity" (1994: 145). Hence, in my analysis, I will trace the negotiation process that each teenage narrator has adopted during her journey of self-identification both in America and in Palestine. In this way, I will examine how these girls perform their multiple cultural identities. In fact, as Steven Salaita states, "although each narrator's personality is distinct, they all share the presence of Palestine as a crucial source of their identities" (2011: 80). In this context, Mawal is the only cousin who still lives in the family's ancestral town of Nawara on the West Bank, in the occupied Palestinian territories, and who has never been to the United States. The other three – Soraya, Khadija and Hala – have to find their way in their American context.

Despite their common cultural background, the girls are going through totally different experiences, which conveys the writer's intention to challenge the widespread depiction of Arab women as homogeneous in mainstream American imaginary. In this

sense, Halaby's novel does away with stereotypical portrayals of Arab women as static and helpless submissive beings, and does this through the freshness of her young protagonists. These teenagers, in fact, stand for thousands of young girls who represent the new generations of Palestinian and Palestinian American women and whose stories are an essential component of the memory of Palestine. Therefore, we can detect the writer's interest in the diasporic constituent of the four cousins' experiences whether in America or in the Palestinian homeland. Mawal does not share her cousins' hyphenated identities because she does not have to cross cultural borders between Palestine and America. Nonetheless, she is equally displaced due to the nature of the geopolitical reality of the Palestinian territories under Israeli military occupation, and hence, the writer's decision to study her situation too.

### **3.2.1 Mawal: The Memory of Palestine**

Among the interesting characters that Laila Halaby presents in her novel is Mawal, the Palestinian teenager who, unlike her cousins, has never left the family's ancestral village of Nawara. Although my dissertation focuses on the study of hybrid characters straddling their double heritage, I would argue that the character of Mawal is very important, as she allows the reader to see into the lives of the ones left behind, the ones who have not had the opportunity to make it whether to the United States or somewhere else. Not only are we invited to share the girl's experiences in Palestine, but also to explore the stories of the people of Nawara. Mawal's narrative allows us, as well, to have another perspective concerning her cousins' diasporic experiences.

Steven Salaita describes Mawal as a "metaphorical anchor, the culturally grounded, responsible keeper of stories" (2011: 80). The narrator demonstrates this

from the second chapter, significantly entitled “Nawara,” and which is to a large extent dedicated to pay tribute to the village. She says, “Our village is called Nawara, which means flowers or blossoms. When you say it, *Naw-waar-a*, a hillside of small white wildflowers comes to mind, or the fragrant new blossoms on an orange or almond tree” (15). Mawal here expresses her affection for her village using this imagery which addresses the senses of sight and smell. Hence, the readers who are not familiar with the Arabic language can see the flowers and smell their fragrance every time they come across the name of the village, Nawara.

Mawal refers to her village as a magical place full of beauty and colors. She then explains how embroidery contributes to Nawara’s uniqueness,

Our village is an island, famous for beautiful embroidered dresses that we call *rozās* while most everyone else calls them *thobes*, and yet surrounded by villages that do not embroider at all. The complicated embroidery on our *rozās* – with both Palestinian and western stitches and patterns – captures the spirit of Nawara. (15)

Mawal proudly highlights her village’s embroidery tradition and exclusive *rozās* that she baptizes as the symbol of Nawara. Halaby focuses on embroidery as a representative of Palestinian cultural heritage and traditions. The continuity of this handicraft means the survival of the memory of Palestine which has been suffering for decades from Israeli attempts to eradicate and deny its existence, and consequently, the existence of Palestinians as a people struggling for its right to self-determination. In this way, stitching can be considered an act of resistance and a reclaiming of Palestinians’ collective memory.

It is relevant to make a connection here with the story of Penelope in Homer’s *Odyssey*. While her husband was away for twenty years during and after the Trojan War, she spent her time weaving in order to stay faithful to him and to dissuade her suitors. Penelope used her weaving as a means to tell her story and to exercise control

over her own destiny. Barbara Walker indicates that Penelope's web is "a sign of protection like the simple pentacle, made even more suggestively defensive by the ring of twenty outward facing points, and the lines of connection drawing all sections together in the center, as a unifying cause or concept draws people together for the preservation of all" (72). In this way, her weaving work succeeded to protect her husband "with her refusal to cut the thread of life, who preserved the life of her husband Odysseus through his many adventures" (72). Instead of cutting the thread she just unwove her work every night. Thus, Penelope's story shows women's determination to be the mistresses of their destiny and also to overcome all the obstacles that come on their way. This is why, weaving has been associated to women's experiences and history, together with the safeguard of traditions and the collective memory.

In this way, Mawal takes an active part in preserving the memory of Palestine, first because she is an embroiderer herself, and second because she is the keeper of the village women's stories. The girl says that "so many women come to spill their secrets and their joys and their agonies because they know my mother – and I – will keep them safe and do no more than stitch them into the fabric of our *rozās*" (17). Hence, she makes a close connection between stories and embroidery because she actually stitches the experiences of all of these women:

Stitch in red for life.

Stitch in green to remember.

Stitch, stitch to never forget. (103)

These stories, unknown to her American cousins, are Mawal's contribution to recording and preserving Palestinian memory. Indeed, the two colors used here – red and green – correspond to the Palestinian flag, making *rozās* and stories components of Palestinian

national identity. For instance, in the year 2008, in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of al Nakba,<sup>34</sup> “names of vanished villages were recalled and embroidered into tapestries that were exhibited around the world.”<sup>35</sup>

In addition, some of Israel’s efforts to deny and erase the identity and history of Palestine can be perceived in banning of the Palestinian flag and its colors in Israel and the recently occupied territories including the West Bank and Gaza after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The occupation authority outlawed any display of Palestinian national symbols to such an extent that in the eighties even Palestinian art exhibitions and paintings started to be considered a threat for their political significance. In this context, In this context, the Palestinian artist and historian Kamal Boullata states that exhibitions organized by the League of Palestinian Artists, created in 1973, “constituted a new form of political resistance.” He explains that “because Palestinian art was an expression of collective identity, Israeli authorities began to impose military censorship on all exhibitions. Even the combined use of the four colors that made up the Palestinian flag was banned.” Boullata says that “unauthorized exhibitions were stormed by troops, with the public ordered to leave and paintings confiscated” (87).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, during the first Intifada (1987 – 1993),<sup>37</sup> young Palestinian activists were arrested by Israeli soldiers for waving sliced watermelon, which displayed, the four colors of the Palestinian flag.

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<sup>34</sup> Al Nakba means disaster or catastrophe in Arabic. It is the term used in Palestine and the Arab World to refer to the events which led to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent dispossession and displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian people.

<sup>35</sup> Andoni, Lamis. “Palestinian Memory Cannot Be Erased.” *Al Jazeera*. July 11, 2008.  
< <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2008/05/200861516588274237.html>>

<sup>36</sup> Boullata, Kamal. “Art.” *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians: Revised Edition*. Ed. Philip Mattar. New York: Facts on File, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> The First Intifada was a grassroots movement of popular uprising against Israeli rule which took place in the occupied territories from 1987 to 1993. In his book entitled *The Politics of Dispossession* (1995), Edward Said states that this “was surely one of the great anticolonial insurrections of the modern period” (xxvii).

Therefore, Israeli occupation's attempts to confine Palestinian symbols were met by a rising consciousness and a determination to record traditions and prevent their disappearance. That's why embroidered costumes, among other traditions, are being re-invigorated as the symbols of the Palestinian past and culture. Embroidered women's garments not only express regional identity but most importantly national Palestinian identity. As Iman Saca states,

despite the political and economic difficulties, however, women in the refugee camps, mainly in Jordan and Lebanon, continued to embroider in the style of their original villages in an attempt to maintain their displaced identity. By continuing the tradition of embroidery and wearing traditional dresses, women felt that in their own way they were keeping part of their heritage and village alive. (15)<sup>38</sup>

In the same way, Shelagh Weir highlights women's efforts to preserve cultural heritage and promote it to younger generations. She points out how

despite their hardships and dislocations, many women of village origin, including those still living in their villages in the West Bank, and those living in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jordan, still wear embroidered dresses and flowing white veils, either for everyday wear or for special occasions. This not only includes the older women, who might be expected to be more conservative in dress and cling more tenaciously to village styles, but also younger women, many of whom have not lived in a village since they were children, or have never done so. (272)<sup>39</sup>

Accordingly, *West of the Jordan* (2003) conveys Halaby's celebration of Palestinian traditions as she sheds light on the rich language of Palestinian costume and artifacts on the one hand, and on the other, tries to reaffirm the country's culture, on the other. In this way, the novel emphasizes how "'traditional' women's costume and embroidery have certainly acquired a new political significance as expressions of Palestinian national identity" (Weir 1989: 273). Therefore, these women's pride of their

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<sup>38</sup> Saca, Iman. *Embroidering Identities: A Century of Palestinian Clothing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Weir, Shelagh. *Palestinian Costume*. London: British Museum Publications Ltd, 1989.



village costumes has become a kind of political activism. In this way, Weir explains that these garments

have not only become an increasingly self-conscious statement of their own Palestinian identity and their national aspirations, but are also, in various modifications, performing the same task on behalf of Palestinians generally, whatever their place of residence, social background or usual modes of attire” (273).

Taking into account the context of Palestinian society which has been the victim of systematic dispossession and fragmentation under the Israeli occupation for decades, an interest in preserving culture and tradition has become a priority, and therefore, “intense efforts are made [...] to study, preserve, and reproduce what comes to be defined as the ‘national heritage’” (Weir 1989: 273). Embroidery, as part of material culture and displaying visual symbols, plays then a crucial role as it embodies the continuity of Palestinian presence from the past to the present. In fact, culture is one of the arguments which can be used to contest Zionist claims denying the very existence of a Palestinian people, and hence, denying its rights to the land of Palestine. Therefore, culture has a close and direct connection with identity, whether individual or collective. In this sense, “a true identity implies continuity; it evokes ancestors and heirs, the dead and the as yet unborn” (Berger 2009: 16).<sup>40</sup>

In this novel, Mawal is the heir who is in charge of ensuring the survival of these traditions, and hence, of the continuity of Palestinian national identity. Through the girl’s embroidery, Halaby focuses on the importance of memory and the act of stitching as a means to remember. Homi Bhabha argues that “Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (1994: 90). Thus, Mawal who has never left the ancestral village in the occupied territories conveys the

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<sup>40</sup> Berger, John. Preface: Concerning Identity. *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present*. By Kamal Boullata. Beirut: Saqi, 2009.

Palestinians' attachment to their land. She "serves as the other three characters' foil in that she reminds them of what they once were and what they were close to becoming" (Salaita 2011: 80).

In this sense, Mawal relates in her narrative the drama of emigration as she refers to the constantly increasing number of young men forced to leave Nawara as a consequence of the economic and political hardships caused by occupation. She focuses on America as a main destination chosen by Palestinians in their quest for opportunities. She says that "Nawara could have a smaller version of herself in the United States, which is like an army calling all able-bodied young men away and then never returning their bodies" (Halaby 2003: 15). Through this image, the teenager tries to convey the fact that Nawara's young men are trapped between two armies: the Israeli occupation forces and America. While the former deports, detains and kills, the last steals them away and keeps them to live there. Mawal displays her disapproval of emigration when she states, "you would think our village was in love with America with all the people who left, like America is the best relative in the world that everyone has to visit. America is more like a greedy neighbor who takes the best of you and leaves you feeling empty" (96).

Consequently, although most young Palestinians think that they are only sojourners who will go back home once they earn enough money, they end up settling in America for good. Mawal's grandmother tells her that "very few men came back at all, or if they did they couldn't stay, as I'm sure you know by the number of cousins you have who don't live here" (98). As a result, these men leave behind "many women here grieving over sons and husbands who have forgotten them, or grieving over the evils that country [America] has introduced their sons to, like drugs and drinking and loose

women and gambling” (15). However, it seems that money is “the good that has come from all the leaving” (96).

Hence, according to Mawal, America is the land which has been taking the best of Nawara’s children. This is why, in some parts of her narrative, she expresses her belief that, in contrast to her cousins, she is privileged to live in Nawara. Once, after listening to a story related by her grandmother, she realizes the importance of the legacy she is receiving. She says: “I tuck this story into my pocket wishing I could stitch it into my skin, like one of the Bedouin tattoos my grandmother wears. Are there stories like this in lovely, tempting America? Do my cousins there even know these little histories? I doubt it” (103). Therefore, it seems that stories, just like tattoos, last forever. In other words, Mawal can be considered a reference for the wide range of stories which record the lives of the people of Nawara, whether the ones living in the homeland or elsewhere. In Mawal’s case, these stories are like traditions passed down from mother to daughter and from grandmother to granddaughter. She also has the opportunity to listen at first hand to many stories from the concerned women who usually come to her house to relate their pains. She explains that “because I was always by mother’s side, people came to think of us as one, or as sisters, more than as mother and daughter, which is why women are not shy to pour out their troubles when I am in the room” (16). Hence, Mawal’s narrative gives voice to these grieving women of Nawara as she tells their histories and painful experiences.

Mawal tells the story of her aunt Huda, her cousin Hala’s mother, which could be entitled “Big-mouth village. Sad love-story girl” (21). Huda joins her brother Hamdi in Arizona where he is studying at university. “Against the advice of the entire village” (20), her father decides to give his smart daughter the opportunity to study abroad in order to earn a degree. He says that “there is nothing wrong with letting a girl learn as

much as a boy does” (21). However, Huda’s stay in America has been quite brief due to a rumor that has circulated in the village in a few hours about her supposed misbehavior. She meets a young man from Jerusalem studying in the same university as her and they start a relationship. So once, one of her brother’s fellow students from Nawara calls “his gossipy mother” back in the village and tells her that Huda has spent the night with her boyfriend:

he told her something like: *I am fine and I see Hamdi Salaama a fair amount, and his sister, of course. Yes, she’s studying. Well, she’s really not so good. If you’ll keep this to yourself, I’ll tell you. Promise, Yama? Well, she’s not so proper and last night she didn’t come home at all. Why indeed? She was spending the night at her boyfriend’s house.* (21)

Consequently, Huda’s father asks Hamdi to send his sister back home or he will disown her. Her parents realize later that she was “telling the truth, and the liar boy denied he had ever said anything, but by then it was too late and Huda was back here” (21). Therefore, gossip has put an end to Huda’s ambitions and her longing for a different future. “It was no surprise that shortly after her return she was married to an older Jordanian man and left Nawara forever” (21). This “big-mouth village” has not only provoked Huda’s return in disgrace, but also her forced marriage to an old foreigner.

As I have mentioned earlier, the village people have not approved since the very beginning the fact that a young woman goes abroad to pursue university studies, perceiving it as a challenge to their society’s codes. These values reduce women to the status of submissiveness and dependence on men, and expect them to perform a role in accordance with the conservative traditions. They are unable to envision a woman as the mistress of her own destiny. These kinds of people do not miss the first opportunity to reduce to ash the dreams of any woman who thinks of challenging the system, and this is exactly what has happened to Huda. In addition to lies which have destroyed her

reputation and her academic and professional future, marriage has definitely stamped on her dreams of freedom and of leading a different life.

Mawal is obviously aware of her aunt's disgrace, which is why she wants to avoid sharing the same fate. She does not want to be one of the victims of this "big-mouth village" of Nawara. She is aware of her condition as an Arab girl living in an Arab village where gossip is the main entertainment practiced. One of the favorite topics is certainly girls' honor and degree of conformity with the imposed rules. Nevertheless, Mawal sometimes shows her desire to do away with these restrictions imposed on women, and to enjoy the freedom of experimenting love, feelings and instincts. In this sense, she says: "I want to be mischievous ... to stand this much closer to the vegetable man who winks, to let him touch my hand when he gives me back my change" (19). However, she has been taught that she has to suppress this kind of supposedly immoral feeling, because these teachings are perpetuated from mother to daughter:

My mother has led me to believe that feelings and thoughts such as these will take me straight to hell, or make me turn out like my untame cousin Soraya, *who ate too much cereal when she was young and has the foolishness of an American in her blood*, and that may be true but I don't much care. I want to sit in the garden and hike my dress up to my knees so my legs can feel the sun as it kisses them. (19)

As I have explained earlier in my analysis of *Arabian Jazz* (1993), religion continues to give shape to social and gender structures in many parts of the Arab world, and this village is no exception. The fusion of religion and traditions controls gender relations, and consequently, imposes oppressive models at the expense of women. The previous excerpt clearly exposes this use of religion in order to repress women's sexuality. In addition, she refers to her Palestinian American cousin Soraya, who Mawal's mother considers loose and degenerate because she has grown up away from

the reach of the homeland's patriarchal constraints on women. In fact, she considers her niece as just a foolish American. However, Mawal does not seem to care much about her mother's perception of Soraya, which may be explained by a slight feeling of envy when she thinks about the degree of freedom that her cousin is enjoying in America. Hence, Mawal reveals here her hidden desire for freedom, as the very fact of thinking about it brings her joy and satisfaction.

In my opinion, Mawal seems to be trying to find a balance between her society's values and her own dreams. She is portrayed as an obedient Arab daughter who does not have any intention to challenge gender roles. She is even aware that her future depends on what her parents decide. Naturally, marriage figures in her future plans, but she thinks "that's all still some time away, though. I still have to finish high school, and then, if my parents will allow me, I want to go to college and become a teacher like Miss Maryam, who teaches English and classical Arabic" (17). Moreover, she wants to avoid being the subject of gossip in the village because she cares about her reputation as a woman, which may explain her hiding of what she considers as her inclination to be malicious and defiant. She knows that this kind of behavior goes against what she has been taught to be appropriate conduct by girls.

Therefore, although she is apparently in conformity with these traditions and she has never put these thoughts into practice, I think that she has her own ambitions of finishing her studies and working. In this way, due to all the stories she has been listening to, she dreams of a fate different from that of Nawara's women. These stories definitely have an important impact on the forging of the girl's personality. She seems to negotiate a balance between her ambitions and her society's gender structure so as to avoid the fate of all of these women with unfulfilled dreams, like her aunt Huda, who "was the first Nawarese girl dragged by marriage across the river Jordan, but not the

last” (47). She explains that, “as life gets harder, more fathers are willing to release their daughters to a different world” (47). It means that they marry their daughters off to Jordanian men, which signifies leaving Palestine forever. Mawal says that soon after, these girls’ “mothers come and weep and lick their wounds in my mother’s house” (47).

One of these grieving mothers is Farah which means “Joy. Surely her father cursed her by giving her that name. One whose name means joy could only know misery” (50). Her sad story reveals the series of hardships undergone by many Palestinian women. At the age of sixteen, she is forced into marriage to an older man “who gave her two children and fists that pounded her with welts to cover her body, welts she ignored or covered” (51). She receives her father’s support to get rid of this violent husband, as he makes him grant her a divorce. However, her father tells her “you will marry again,” and forces her into another marriage because “there is no freedom for a divorced woman with two children” (51). After three years, her second husband dies and leaves her with two more babies to feed. Once more, her father tells her “you will marry again,” and she gets married for the third time, this being the only solution for “a blackened widow back in her parents’ house, with four giant mouths to feed” (51).

As a woman, Farah has to depend on a man to survive and to provide a living for her kids. She has no choice because as long as her father decides everything, she has to obey his will. Hence, she has to remain always under control and obey the authority of a man, whether a father or a husband. As Amal Talaat Abdelrazek writes:

Due to financial problems and scarcity of men who either get killed by Israeli forces or who escape from this fate by immigrating to the United States, Arab fathers seize the opportunity when they find a suitable husband for their daughters, even if it means they will have to marry older men whom the daughters do not know. (136)<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Abdelrazek, Amal Talaat. *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossing*. New York: Cambria Press, 2007. Print

Farah thus stands for many Palestinian women confined by their patriarchal society as they are “taught to accept every agony as God’s fate and bury their ache because they cannot protest God’s will” (Abdelrazek 2007: 136). For these women, “there was no way to change [anything], just accept God’s will and teach yourself rigidity. Teach yourself to keep all the pain in one small corner inside” (Halaby 2005: 48-49).

Therefore, Farah has learnt to repress her pain and accept suffering, because no alternative is available either for her or for the next generation. In fact, her nineteen-year-old daughter endures the same fate as she is forced into marriage with an older Jordanian man. Farah, however, cannot contain her tears when she thinks about her daughter. Even the few times she visits her child in the other bank of the river Jordan, she is forced to go through the humiliations inflicted on Palestinians on a daily basis. In this way, Halaby takes the reader to Israeli occupation forces checkpoints where Palestinians are subject to ignominious treatment. Farah “waited, waited with all the other women who were crossing the bridge, going home, envying the foreigners who could cross from another spot with nothing more than a stamped paper for their passports” (48). Farah thinks that they are

really waiting to spread their legs for the enemy, who ... think old ladies are the most dangerous because they wear the most clothes and have had the most children; they could hide an entire village between their legs if they wanted to.

Farah felt nothing as she took off her clothes all the way down to naked, avoiding looking at her body... The women guards poked around with rubber gloves and Farah felt nothing – no anger, nothing more than tiredness. Such things were accepted as part of life, like that woman’s six miscarriages... not pleasant, but unavoidable, God-given burdens. (49)

This extract obviously illustrates the fate of many Palestinian women with no options for change as their very existence seems to be a burden. They are doomed to endure a double sense of oppression: colonization and sexism. Hence, these gendered and



political confinements imposed on women complicate their situation as they engender displacement and alienation.

Farah's story, however, is contrasted with that of the young woman she meets in the collective cab on her way back from the frontier to the village. Actually, this "woman and her children had crossed the bridge with the foreigners" (50). Farah looks at her and is "surprised by how Arab her features were in contrast to her short curly hair and her western clothes" (51). She tells Farah that she has lived in Puerto Rico for many years until she decides to come back to Palestine. She explains that Puerto Rico is "beautiful too, if you can close your eyes to the crime and the lack of morality" (52). She adds, "that's why I came back. How can I let my children grow up in a place where girls are women at eleven years old and boys shoot real guns at each other at twelve?" (52). Halaby is here speaking of another kind of experience involving, in this case, a Palestinian woman who leaves Palestine to make a new life abroad and then decides to bring her family back for good. Her decision is generated by her will to protect her children and to ensure their upbringing according to her homeland's cultural values, and in order to cultivate Palestinian traditions.

Once again, the writer insists on the idea of the multiplicity of Palestinian women's experiences. Mawal gives the reader the opportunity to get into the lives of the women left behind and also of those who decide to come back. Hence, the literary device of this young teenager allows these women to have a space in the novel where they can speak and express themselves. They can grow wings and fly away through the space of the narrative where they are given voice to tell their stories. The mere act of doing this allows them to release their pain and gain some kind of release. It gives them the strength to continue and hence, to exist, thanks to the network of solidarity that has been created around the embroidery rituals.

### 3.2.2 Soraya: The Rebel

Born in Palestine, Soraya moves to the United States at an early age, where her family settles down. I think she is a very interesting and special character who emerges as an Arab American young woman aware of her hyphenated identity and struggling to fit into the in-between space she lives in. She reveals her passionate and rebellious personality from the very beginning of her narrative when she opens it with the following sentence, “I have fire” (24). Soraya introduces herself to the reader in a tone full of confidence and strength stating that, “everybody knows it. They see it in my beautiful brown exotic eyes that I paint full of Maybelline kohl to turn my tears black” (24). Soraya is portrayed as the opposite of Mawal, the good Arab girl. In this context, she remarks that her “mother is disappointed that I am not a good daughter, but she won’t admit that she has anything to do with it and says instead that I have a weak spirit and have been ‘taken in by the lie that is America: freedom, freedom, freedom’” (24-25).

Freedom is the key word that best describes Soraya’s spirit, which provokes criticism and rejection of her behavior by her family to such an extent that her mother, for instance, considers her almost an illness. She tells her daughter: “You are like labor that never ends: pain everywhere all the time” (25). Soraya just does not care about what her mother thinks because she wants to enjoy the freedom that America has granted her. She explains, “I like to enjoy myself, unlike my sister Pauline who, despite her American name, is very conservative and believes that all answers lie in God’s words, and that suffering is good” (25). Therefore, she considers herself the opposite of what her mother regards as right and suitable for a girl of her age. Moreover, she admits that she is not conservative, nor religious, and that she does not believe that “suffering is

good.” In this way, Soraya distances herself from the other female members of her family and community. She resists her parents’ attempts to impose their Arab homeland’s norms on her: once outside her family sphere she gets rid of all of these restrictions and behaves like any other American teenager her age.

Soraya protests that “the older people all act the same way they did when they were home, which isn’t fair in a lot of ways because we’re in America now, but they tell us we are not supposed to be living an American life” (31). The girl’s links with Arab culture are not so tight due to the fact that she has lived most of her life away from her family’s homeland. But most importantly, unlike her sister and cousins, she does not really want to accept the role and the behavior she is expected to have. A rebellious teenager, she is determined to enjoy her American life when she is out from her community’s reach.

One of the most revealing features about the girl’s rebellious nature, for example, is that she is sexually active. Soraya is aware of her attractive body as she says:

I have a skinny girl’s waist with woman hips and large breasts. I know my body is sexy; I can tell by the way men look at me, by the way men have always looked at me. I try to hide it in front of my family, and most days I go to school early so I can change out of my loose pants and elbow-length shirts into tighter clothes that make my body show more. (30).

Therefore, under the pressure of traditional Arab norms of behavior, the teenager is forced to live a double life. She is a sexy and exotic young lady who does what she pleases to satisfy her desires when she is away from her family sphere, while she tries to be discreet and respect Arab customs at home. However, the teenager is very critical of many aspects of Arab culture especially concerning all restrictions preventing her from behaving freely as any other American girl would.

In this context, Soraya cannot understand the criticism she receives about her way of dancing at celebrations. She says:

It always happens like this: when it comes for the women to dance, I put them to shame. Even when I was little it happened like that. I don't know where it comes from, but they know it – it's fire. They talk about how bad I am, especially at weddings in the States, because I dance shamelessly where men can see me and not just in front of women and a camera. (29)

The girl is negatively judged for her dancing because on the dance floor she is passionate and enthusiastic, and she really loves it. She dances in a way that challenges Arab standards of behavior according to which women are supposed to dance discreetly in public in order not to attract attention. However, Soraya does away with these norms and lets the fire she has inside lead her body in its sensual hip movements, provoking her mother's shame, for instance. Dancing gives Soraya the opportunity to live a multidimensional experience engendering a heightened awareness of bodily sensation and subsequent emotions, a sense of freedom and of being one's self, an ability to forget everything else, a feeling of having access to a mystical or spiritual dimension, and also a need to dance (Bond and Stinson, 52-87). In this respect, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek explains that "dancing has been Soraya's way of letting out her frustration as well as expressing her joy, tasting her freedom, and rebelling against all restrictions imposed on her by any kind of authority including her own mother and Arab culture... For her, dancing creates an atmosphere of rave that inspires confidence and independence" (141).

Hence, dancing provides the teenager with a sense of power and control over her own body. Soraya uses her body as a weapon to challenge not only her family and community, but also all the moral values she is told to follow. Moreover, she tells us about one of her visits to Nawara when she dances at her grandmother's house:

Once I danced every night in a black slip with a candle burning in front of a barred window that often had Israeli soldiers on the other side of it. It was only a room in my grandmother's house in boring little Nawara, but *hiz hiz hiz* the way my feet taught my hips to follow the drumbeats, I imagined I was an imprisoned princess and the man who watched me from behind his gun was my evil captor. I would dance every night, waiting for the heroic prince who would rescue me and love me until the drumbeats stopped, which would be never. (Halaby 2003: 28)

This passage is very telling as it reveals Soraya's perception of things. First of all, dancing is the activity which allows her to defeat boredom in her little village back home. It makes her grow wings and fly away through the walls of the room engaging her in an ecstatic state of mind distracting her from all physical obstacles and emphasizing her feeling of freedom. This feeling even makes her challenge the Israeli soldier hidden behind his gun outside her window. She does not have any gun to face him; she just has her body to assert that he cannot intimidate her. Her body is the proof that she is alive and she is there. Even if she does not live in Nawara anymore, she still belongs there.

On the other hand, this passage also displays how the girl feels imprisoned by the restrictions imposed by her Arab background. She is looking for a way to set herself free and get rid of the displacement she feels. The prince who would release her may be whoever she will marry when she finishes high school in one year. Soraya is aware that her mother is impatiently waiting to marry her off, and hence, get rid of the burden of having what she considers a headache of a daughter. However, the teenager is aware that she is the one who holds the key to her own salvation, and no man can do it for her, which is why she cannot allow a set of traditions to prevent her from being happy. In this sense, she does not understand her mother's comments about her dancing when she tells her that "it is not proper to behave like that, like a loose woman" (29). Soraya answers her mother saying: "But if I'm happy, what's wrong with that?" (29). The

mother's answer to her does not contain any explanation. She just says: "You shouldn't show it. Finish" (29).

Soraya is not really convinced by her mother's statement as she seems unable to provide answers to her daughter other than the obligation to blindly follow Arab traditions. The teenager criticizes this narrow way of thinking which aims to restrict women's behavior in order to control them through a set of rules imported from the homeland, and again perpetuated by women. She expresses her rejection of such impositions and her intention to experience what these rules consider inappropriate. As she says:

I like to have fun, to enjoy myself and to feel good. I have always been that way. My mother tells me how wrong this is, like it is evil or something and my sister says the same thing. I think they think it's wrong because they don't know what it is to be satisfied, and it scares them. It seems all of the women in our family are like this. Even though married ladies talk about sex, it is always within the context of a marriage and you have to have been a virgin. (30)

Here, yet again, Soraya distances herself from her female relatives as she reveals that sexual freedom is a fundamental component of her own perception of herself as a liberated woman. She criticizes the fact that sex is still a taboo that most women of her community deliberately avoid to the point that they do not know the meaning of satisfaction. This kind of self-censorship prevents them from exercising their freedom and knowing how good it feels to do it. Moreover, Soraya highlights the element of fear as she considers that Arab women are afraid of getting satisfaction. In the same line of reasoning, she expresses her rejection of the idea of virginity declaring that she is not concerned by it. In fact, she claims the right to be the mistress of her own body and rejects any traditions that restrict her freedom and prevent her from finding happiness.

However, Soraya explains that in order to exercise that freedom she has to lie to her parents: "This year I told my family a thousand and one lies and went to a disco and

danced for a beautiful man who came to love me, love me so much that I carried his credit card, wore his jewelry, and had lunch with him until I satisfied him in every way” (28). The girl’s determination to enjoy her sexual freedom is obvious to such an extent that she declares herself “a new breed. A rebel. My mother and her sisters can spill a story from any woman, but I can make a man talk. I am in between. Familiar ears. Safe mouth. I have men as friends, as well as lovers” (56). Hence, in the process of deconstructing Arab women’s behavior regarding sex, Soraya tries to find a negotiated in-between space of her own where she celebrates her status of a new breed. Unlike her female counterparts, she is not afraid of men as she has no problem getting closer to them whether as friends or as lovers. She has the advantage of being able to choose what kind of relationship she wants to have with the men surrounding her, whether to be the friend who they do not hesitate to trust to keep their secrets, or the lover who satisfies them and enjoys lovemaking with them. Soraya definitely has no taboos as she has released herself from the ethical and moral rules related to her Arab culture which control women’s sexuality and also judge them according to their sexual behavior.

Therefore, the teenager rejects ethical judgments about her sexual behavior which she tries to remove from the religious and moral scale: “I’m sick of everything being *haram* or *halal*, but nothing in between. I am in between” (117). Soraya insists on her status as a new breed whose aim is to find an in-between space devoid of extremes. Her situation echoes what Amy Ling calls the “between-world” condition of Chinese second generation immigrants in the United States. She asserts that

the very condition [of the between-world] itself carries both negative and positive charges. On the one hand, being between-worlds can be interpreted to mean occupying the space or gulf between two banks; one is thus in a state of suspension, accepted by neither side and therefore truly belonging nowhere... On the other hand, viewed from a different perspective, being between worlds may be considered as having footholds on both banks and therefore belonging to two worlds at once. One does not have less; one has more. (177)

Aware of her situation, Soraya is looking for a space situated between both worlds she belongs to. For this reason, she wants to do away with the dichotomy of “haram” and “halal” according to Muslim codes, through situating herself somewhere in between. These two terms are commonly used in Muslim societies in order to denote whether or not something is permissible or forbidden, including aspects of behavior, speech, dress and food. As defined in *The Historical Dictionary of Islam*,<sup>42</sup> “Haram is that which is forbidden and sinful and will be punished on the Day of Judgment” (Adamec 2009: 119). On the other hand, the term “halal” means “‘Permissible.’ That which is lawful and allowed, as compared to that which is forbidden (haram). It includes proper behavior in law as well as the consumption of food” (115). Hence, the girl seems dissatisfied with what she considers to be the essentialist perception of religion dividing everything into two opposed extremes limiting her freedom. She simply wants to do away with these labels and find refuge in her own space.

Soraya’s longing to find this space is not only the outcome of her rejection of Arab traditions but also of her frustrated attempts to belong to America. In this context, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek states that “Soraya suffers from a deep sense of displacement, living in two different worlds but failing to become part of either one. She fluctuates between an Arab world that she loves but whose traditions she rejects and an American world that she looks up to but cannot attain” (140). The teenager is aware that she is perceived as different and even exotic by mainstream America, which prevents her from being accepted. “‘She’s Arabian,’ they say at my high school as I pass by them. ‘In her country they don’t have furniture or dish-washers, only oil’” (Halaby 2003: 24). Not only does she let her school mates expose their stereotypical ideas about her homeland

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<sup>42</sup> Adamec, Ludwig W. *Historical Dictionary of Islam*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009. Print.



and her people, but she also contributes to the reinforcement of such misconceptions and misrepresentations. “I tell them what they want to hear, which is nasty stories about young men sticking their things into goats and some twelve-year-old girl being carried off on a camel to be third wife to old Shaykh So-and-So and the five oil wells my father owns” (24).

This story reminds me of my own personal experience from my first two years in Spain. This occurred to me countless times when I first met people who had been to Tunisia, my country of origin. I carefully listened to their stories as tourists in the bazaars of the medina quarters scattered all over Tunisian cities. To my astonishment, they always finished with the story of the handsome Tunisian shop keeper who offered one hundred or so camels to someone’s father or husband or boyfriend in order to get her as a wife. I have always taken seriously these kinds of stories which used to upset me very much. I come from the northeast coast of Tunisia, my family lives in a big bright white house by the Mediterranean Sea, and no one has offered my father a single camel to ask him for my hand in marriage. As far as I know, we do not exchange camels for women in Tunisia. I have always considered these kinds of camel jokes as awful and embarrassing because most of these people actually believed them. In my opinion, these shop keepers are the ones to blame because in their attempts to get closer to the tourists and even flirt with Western girls, they try to focus on stereotypes in order to emphasize their mysterious exotic side. Unfortunately, the consequence of this behavior rather gives the impression of Tunisia as a backward country and helps reinforce the orientalist preconceptions of the recipient.

Just like this kind of Tunisian shop keepers, Soraya uses the stereotypes commonly used against her people in order to approach her American classmates. She tells them what they want to hear so as to satisfy them, and therefore, get their

acceptance. The girl mentions her mother's reaction to this, and says: "my mother exploded the first time she heard about a story I told. 'You have to show the best of us, not the ugly lies.' But I let my ambassador sister and cousins do that while I talk ghetto slang" (24). Therefore, the girl's mother worries about the misconceptions of her Arab culture among mainstream America, which is obviously not the case of an indifferent Soraya who is just seeking a way to set foot in the American world. Speaking ghetto slang is part of this strategy too, to the dismay of her sister: "'That's not English!' My sister yells. 'My ass this ain't English!' I yell back" (24). This special style of speech is another element that Soraya uses in order to lay her claim to her Americanness.

However, the girl is aware that the myth of America and the American dream are not valid for everybody. She comes to realize that through the experiences of many Arab immigrants she has witnessed in her milieu. She criticizes the internalization of a sometimes pernicious individualism when she contests the ideal of the immigrant who "Works His Ass off" (57) in order not only to make it and succeed, but also to be accepted in America. On the other hand, Steven Salaita mentions non-immigrant Americans' mythology which casts "the United States as a secure but perpetually threatened site of economic possibility and ethical exceptionalism. (The notion of American exceptionalism claims that the United States is an exceptional force of good in the world and that no other nation can match its freedoms and its inventiveness)" (80-81). In this context, what Soraya does in her narrative is to undermine these American dream ideals through her exposé of Arab immigrant characters whose experiences in the United States have actually led them to deceive themselves.

She speaks, for instance, about Sameer Samaha, the hardworking immigrant whose "story is the saddest Nawara story" (Halaby 2003: 84) the teenager has known. He "came to this country to be a success story, not a millionaire success, but a place

here and a house in Nawara and lots of kids and enough money to be a happy kind of success” (84). He has worked hard for long hours for Soraya’s father in order to save all the money he can for the future he dreams of. In a period of five years he becomes able to “put a down payment on a house – a house here is Los Angeles!—and returned to Nawara with his savings to look for a bride” (86). Once back in America with his beautiful wife Suad, he goes back to his long working days while she is left alone at home. He starts little by little to neglect being loving and caring about her as he comes back home late at night so exhausted, which has led to his wife’s growing dissatisfaction after three years of marriage.

One day, after witnessing his coworker’s romantic proposal to his fiancée applauded by people in the street, he feels the need to go home. “‘I have to kiss my wife,’ he said. ‘I have to love her and make her feel loved. I will treat her American-style with no hiding words’” (93). He asks for a permit to leave work early and heads home. Unfortunately, just in front of the house and in the presence of Suad, he gets stabbed fourteen times by a supposed mugger to whom he has refused to hand over his wallet. However, Soraya has her own doubts about Sameer’s tragic end as she thinks that Suad has something to do with it. She suspects that the latter has invented it all, and that the poor man has actually been murdered by his wife’s presumed lover after he has caught them together. She has always thought that Suad is “a very smart girl,” while Sameer “wasn’t that brilliant,” and in addition to that, she is “one of those people who show one face outside her house and another one inside it” (88). In this sense, the girl speculates that Suad has been taking on secret lovers in her husband’s absence in order to find company and entertainment. Therefore, Soraya comes to the following conclusion: “So that is what you get for Working Your Ass Off and then trying to be traditional” (95). Sameer has realized too late – on the day of his death— that he has

been working too hard at the expense of his marriage and his own life as well. Hence, the teenager here highlights the fact that hard work and honesty alone are not a guarantee for success in America.

Soraya's narrative also takes the reader into the life of her Palestinian friend Walid, who she describes as "Student Visa Who Made Friends With Americans. He went to technical school, and now he repairs copy machines and pretty much Works His Ass Off" (57). Walid is presented as a hardworking young man who has chosen to adopt an American lifestyle and hence to keep his distance from the Arab community because he thinks "they are too expensive to be around. 'Someone is always getting married, having a baby, getting a new job, and you have to spend too much money on them. I spend money on no one and no one spends money on me.' That, and they are very nosy" (57). Walid is not interested in participating in his community's family and social events, in this way loosening his ties with his peers. Embracing American individualism, he refuses to either give or receive money as this is common on this kind of occasion. He prefers to spend the money on his own things and to keep himself safe from the Arab American community's possible judgments and gossip. That's why he has chosen to stay away from them and live among white Americans. In this sense, Soraya adds that Walid's "tastes are pure white man. Lives in Orange County... Every Friday he does not go to pray, but instead goes to Samson's, three blocks from his apartment. And has four beers, *just enough to carry you away*" (57).

However, Soraya mentions an incident she and Walid get involved in once in a bar with a group of white men. After a while inside talking, they are approached by a white customer yelling at them: "Speak English!". Walid's answer that they speak what they please does not satisfy the man who replies: "Fucking Mexicans" (58). The two Arab Americans decide to leave when the man brings his friends and says, "You speak

English pretty good for a wetback. Just remember, this ain't a Mexican joint. You go somewhere else to drink your *cervezas* and hang out with your *puta*" (59). This man's racist comments convey his belief that Soraya and Walid have violated the white exclusivity of "The Jack Knife" bar with its "white name, white customers, white neighborhood" (58). He condemns them as foreigners who have no right to be in the same place as the country's true citizens who are the white people, according to him. He uses offensive remarks and insults in order to show that he has the authority to decide who can be in that all-white place and that there is no room for immigrants. Therefore, this segregationist discourse draws a line between the man's group, on the one hand, and Walid and Soraya, on the other, classifying them as the "Others."

When the white man reiterates his insults towards the two young people addressing them again as "Fucking Mexicans!" Soraya retorts: "'We are not Mexicans!' I shouted. 'We are Americans'" (59). In this escalating situation, the young girl bravely defies this racist by claiming their Americanness. Her aim is to shout out loud that they are just as American as him, and that they have the same rights in this country of theirs. This defiant reaction further infuriates this group of white men, and consequently, leads them to commit aggression and violence. They beat up Walid, leaving him lying on the floor and run away. This is their reaction to Soraya's declaration that she and Walid are Americans. They see themselves as defending the purity of American identity from brown or colored invaders.

Later, when a policewoman comes to investigate the aggression, the following conversation takes place:

"So they beat you up for being Mexican?" the policewoman asked.  
"We're not Mexican."  
"You got beaten up for being Mexican and you're not Mexican? What are you?"  
"Palestinian."

“Well you got off pretty lucky then.” The policewoman was quiet for a minute. “That jacket sure makes you look Mexican.” (59-60)

To the dismay of Walid and Soraya, the policewoman suggests that being Arab is considered worse than being Mexican and that the situation would have been much worse if the group had known their real background. Halaby here focuses on the perception of Arabs in mainstream America, where stereotypes have created a homogenized as well as dehumanized image of them inspiring rejection and hatred. At this moment, the American dream gets smashed to pieces and becomes a nightmare, as it does not seem to be available for all, and even less so for Palestinians.

Soraya’s disenchantment is so deep that this episode makes her bitterly think about the set of stereotypes ruling the Americans’ portrayal of her people.

Sneak back home, heart pounding hours later, with rage, with hate. What loser morons and, squeezing tears out, wishing that it was one of those American movies where Walid would knock those guys to the floor and we would walk off without a scratch, my heroic prince defending my honor... but that’s not what the American movie would show, would it? Instead it would show the super American guy knocking the scummy Arab flat on the ground like what happened. Still wishing... that I were a superhero like in those cartoons where she comes in and wipes out the bad guys and still looks great. But there aren’t any Arab ones, are there? My hair is too dark, too thick; my skin is too far away from white to let me even pretend to be an American superhero. (60)

Back home, Soraya is still affected by the incident she has been involved in at the bar and the subsequent policewoman’s subsequent comments confirming the idea about the rejection of Arabs, and Palestinians in particular, in American society. In a moment, the girl’s imagination makes her reproduce the scene and put it in the context of a movie where Walid is portrayed as a superhero who is able to defeat the aggressors and save the girl.

However, she ruefully realizes at once that this kind of scene is unlikely to appear in American movies, which are generally unfavorable to Arabs who are mostly

portrayed as foreign backward villains and terrorists to be defeated. Now she knows that this is also true in real life. After that, Soraya regrets that she cannot imagine herself either as an American cartoon superhero because of her non-white physical appearance which would be judged too ethnic, too Arab. Moreover, she knows that Arab women can neither be positively depicted in Hollywood nor can they be presented as other than submissive and oppressed. The girl is frustrated and then resigned about the representation of Arabs in American media and Hollywood movies. Indeed, the scholar Jack Shaheen has made an analysis of about 900 American films to document his work about the portrayal of Arabs in American films. He states that the representations of Middle Easterners in the films that he has studied include:

Bearded Mullahs, billionaire sheiks, terrorist bombers, black Bedouins, and noisy bargainers. Woman surface either as gun toters or bumbling subservient, or as belly dancers bouncing voluptuously in palaces and erotically oscillating in slave markets. More recently, image-makers are offering other caricatures of Muslim women: covered in black from head to toe, they appear as uneducated, unattractive and enslaved beings, slowly attending man, they follow several paces behind abusive sheiks. (2000: 23)

Hence, aware of this reality, Soraya comes to realize that she will never be accepted as an American girl and that she will always be subjected to racism in a country where race lines matter and where it is not really safe to be Arab.

The young girl's deconstruction of the American dream through the recounting of her own experiences as well as those of Palestinian immigrants in the United States has helped her understand that assimilation into American society is beyond her reach. She observes how painful her journey to find a space for her own has become. Hence, at the end of her narrative, she remembers Palestine: "*Who would think I would want to go back, just to watch my grandmother watching the day that sits slow and fat like a watermelon, watch the sky watching us, beg for the sun to cover us quietly*" (Halaby

2003:189). Soraya reveals the nostalgia she feels inside about her home country and her wish that she had never left for America with her parents for a new life there. She misses the simplicity and quietness of Nawara. She misses her grandmother. The image of the latter is highly significant as it stands for the origins, the roots and the attachment to the land. However, we learn that her grandmother is dying, which implies the imminent loss of one of the most important bonds to Palestine. But although she has no memories of her early life there, Soraya feels the need to maintain the links with the homeland which may provide her with the answers she is looking for.

The girl openly expresses the feelings of loss and displacement when she says: “Lost in somewhere you grew up in, with a language you have taken, with a world that you want, but which is behind that clear steel curtain. *Watch it. Watch it all you want, but it will never be yours*” (189). Soraya expresses her frustration at the “steel curtain” which prevents her from having access to America, a country she has grown up in and whose language she speaks. Her eagerness to fully belong to America is likely to remain unsatisfied because of this strong barrier which does not allow her to cross to the other side. Nevertheless, Soraya is unwilling to be one of Nawara’s women with unfulfilled dreams. She knows about her family’s intention to marry her off soon but she refuses this fate awaiting her, as well as all the restrictions imposed on her by her community’s rules:

I don’t want a husband who walks under clouds, that is not my freedom. How can God mean this for anyone, a struggle that can never be won, a debt that can never be repaid. I sit silently and wait and pretend it does not exist, pretend there is no after-anything, that all there is, is now and I have to eat it up, devour what I can because there is no take-out service here. (190)

Caught between two worlds, she is aware of the need to overcome the displacement she feels in the midst of the different Arab and American realities. On the one hand, she is



afraid of the role of wife and mother she is expected to perform soon according to her parents' plans for her. On the other, she is tired of trying to set foot in a world beyond her reach and which increases her alienation. Therefore, she comes to the conclusion that she can no longer live a double life as she has been doing so far. She knows that she has to find her own negotiated in-between space where she can live her difference and celebrate the new breed status she claims for herself. In the meantime, she finds refuge in music and dancing, "music loud, loud, loud, to drown it all and make my escape plan" (191).

### **3.2.3 Khadija: The Shy one**

Just like her cousin Soraya, Khadija struggles to negotiate a complicated second generation Arab American experience and a conflicted individual identity. Her narrative displays her character's development as well as the shaping of her personality and identity. The different stories she narrates take the reader to some episodes of her life that help trace her experience as an Arab American female teenager. Born in the United States to Palestinian parents, she has lived in Los Angeles all her life and she has never had the opportunity to visit her homeland. She opens her narrative explaining the origin of her name: "In Islam, Khadija was the Prophet Muhammad's wife. She was much older than he was and had a lot of money. He was said to have loved her very much" (36). Despite the girl's attempts to emphasize her name's positive historical connotation related to the Islamic tradition, the very fact that she feels it necessary to give an explanation of it right at the beginning reveals how uncomfortable she feels about it. She openly expresses her belief that this kind of name actually makes her life difficult: "In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle. If they

can get the first part of it right, the ‘Kha’ part, it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice cream” (36). Khadija has a name difficult to pronounce for non Arabs which makes her feel embarrassed about her American friends’ inability to say it correctly.

Hence, the girl’s name is the first element which marks her difference from others. She even says that, “I’m sure that if the original Khadija went to school in America that she would hate her name just as much as I do” (36). The teenager’s awareness about the beauty and significance of her name does not prevent her from hating it. Her discomfort leads her to choose a Western name and ask her friends at school to call her Diana. Khadija feels that her name does not suit her because it prevents her from being the American she wants to be. This name-changing symbolizes the girl’s aim to do away with her Arab cultural identity in order to find harmony within her American milieu. This reminds one of the naming practices followed by many early Arab Americans who, regardless of their religious background, have changed their first names or family names to more American- or European-sounding ones as part of their efforts to integrate into American society and accelerate their assimilation process. For instance, “a Muslim man named *Abd Allah*, meaning the ‘servant of God,’ may change his name into *Abdul*, meaning ‘servant of,’ which does not seem to have a complete meaning. Similarly, many Christian Arabs change their Arabic names that are found in the Bible such as *Ibrahim* or *Butrus* into *Abraham* and *Peter*, their English counterparts” (Almubaye 2007: 93).

However, Khadija’s attempts to pass as an American through the adoption of a Western name turns out to be in vain. In fact, one of her classmates tells her: “But, you don’t look like a Diana.” When Khadija asks what she *does* look like, the girl replies: “I don’t know. Like a Kadeeja, I guess” (Halaby 2003: 37). Therefore, apart from her

name, her Arab features emphasize her difference as well, which makes it more difficult for her to pretend to be a Diana at school, which is an important location where she has the opportunity to live through some decisive experiences on her journey to come to terms with her identity. In this context, the girl mentions her teacher Mr. Napolitano, who “expects me to know more than the other kids because my parents aren’t American themselves. I want to scream at him that I am just as American as anyone here” (74). Hence, Khadija’s teacher here contributes to her growing sense of alienation as he classifies her as a non-American. Although she likes him as a teacher, she disapproves of his tendency to label his pupils as either Americans or non-Americans. Nevertheless, being an American by right of birth makes her strongly proclaim her Americanness against the attempts of all the others – her parents and her teacher among them – to consider her otherwise, which leads her to somehow reject her ethnic origin.

In this same context, the teenager mentions how her mother “gets really mad” during their recurrent arguments about who she is: “‘You are Palestinian,’ she says in Arabic. ‘*You* are Palestinian,’ I tell her in English. ‘I am American.’” (74). This kind of conversation is significant as even the different languages used by the mother and her daughter emphasize the divergence between them. Here we can perceive a generational gap where the mother is deeply attached to her cultural and ethnic identity, and expecting her recalcitrant daughter to be the same. Khadija tries to convince her mother with arguments to illustrate her point of view. She says, “Ma, I can’t speak Arabic right, I’ve never even been there, and I don’t like all of those dancing parties. I like stories and movies. I can be American and still be your daughter” (74).

The girl here sheds light on the lack of any strong ties connecting her to the Arab homeland in order to prove that she is American and not Arab. She starts with the Arabic language that she has not mastered, which in itself signifies the loss of an

important characteristic of her cultural identity. In this sense, Sjak Kroon asserts that “language is one of the major features of ethnic or ethnolinguistic group membership and that ethnic identity is most powerfully expressed through the ethnic group language” (421). Accordingly, taking into account the reciprocal relationship between language and ethnic identity, Khadija’s indifference towards her parents’ language suggests her desire to not belong to the Arab community.

The teenager argues as well that she has never visited Palestine, which means that she has not had the opportunity to examine the homeland in situ with all of its features. Everything that she knows about it has been told to her by others because she has never lived her own Palestinian experience. Hence, the perception that she has about Palestine is constructed upon her parents’ and relatives’ memories, which means collective memories and not her own individual ones. In this way, the access she has to Arab culture is also conditioned by the mediation of the others. It is important to highlight the crucial role played by collective memories as they provide a sense of continuity needed for the construction of a diasporic community. However, Mary Chamberlain gives an equal importance to individual memories for people in diaspora, stating that

memories are all unique and personal, each an account of the individual’s life course from childhood to maturity, of the transformations from a [...] village to a migrant in a busy metropolis, and of the fictionalizing process inherent in the construction of a narrative of self. Memories are a key route into revealing and understanding the 38 processes, adjustments, and negotiations of migrants, of the mobile and liminal worlds they inhabit, of the connections with and the longings for home. (185-86)

Therefore, collective memories alone are definitely not enough for Khadija to construct her own diasporic experience as a Palestinian American. Consequently, the absence of the personal and individual aspect of this experience makes it difficult for her to feel a sense of belonging to her Arab community.

In the aforementioned quarrel between daughter and mother, the teenager continues her argumentation choosing to use dancing parties as a representative aspect of Arab culture that she does not identify with in order to contrast it with stories and movies that she does relate to in American culture. She categorically rejects these social and family gatherings that constitute a crucial part of community life. In my opinion, Khadija here once more shows her resistance to being considered Palestinian or even half Palestinian, half American. She does not seem to accept her hyphenated identity because she perceives herself as American only. Finally, she concludes her argument saying that while being American she still is her mother's daughter. Nevertheless, the mother does not seem to care about her daughter's reasoning and firmly states: "No! No daughter of mine is American" (Halaby 2003: 74). The mother, as a first-generation immigrant to the United States holding an idealized image of her homeland cannot easily accept her daughter's embracing of the host country's culture, and tries to instill in her the importance of Palestine and to force her to follow Arab traditions. She has brought up her daughter in a strict way, forcing her to spend her time doing housework and looking after her younger brothers. With such domineering parents, Khadija has no choice.

There is another telling example which illustrates Khadija's continuous challenge to her parents: her Jewish school friend Michael. The girl is aware that she cannot tell her parents about this friendship, first because Michael is a boy and second, because he is Jewish. She says that at her age she is not allowed anymore to befriend boys. She, however, does not consider that being the daughter of Palestinian parents should be an obstacle to having a Jewish friend. After all, if her family and relatives blame the Israeli Jews for the loss of Palestine, she does not seem to care about it. She rather tries to find points in common between Michael and herself, such as the fact that

both Muslims and Jews face east when they pray. Although Khadija's mother always tries to monitor her daughter's acquaintances, the girl has succeeded this time in hiding her friendship with Michael.

Once more, it is the mother's role to preserve the homeland's values and models and to reproduce them in the present in order to transmit them to the daughters. Ernest McCarus states that,

The majority of immigrant Palestinian women in the United States believe that certain values considered traditional in Western society form the backbone of their culture and deserve the highest respect. These include the primacy of the extended family, collective responsibility for kin, hospitality, respect for status superiors, and control of women's sexuality. (89)

Among the values that Khadija's mother tries to inculcate in her daughter, I will concentrate now on the sexual aspect. The teenager complains about the lack of dialogue with her mother as she talks to her "only about house things and taking-care-of-your-brothers things, and sometimes don't-do-that-or-you'll-never-marry things" (Halaby 2003: 37). Hence, the mother warns the teenager to keep "that secret thing between your legs" (178), highlighting in this way the importance of virginity. She explains to her that "your husband has to be the one to take it from you... Otherwise you are a disgrace to us and we are stuck with you forever." The mother insists and switches to English to make herself clearer and says, "You shameful" (179). The mother's insistence on her daughter being Palestinian just like her reveals her wish that the young girl should cultivate bonds to the homeland exclusively and not to America. She is acutely aware that Khadija is growing up in a place with different social and cultural realities, which spurs her to use warnings and threats in order to orient her because otherwise she will be a disgrace to the family.

Hence, when expressing her concern about her daughter's sexual behavior and virginity, Shahira, as an average Arab mother, does not give reasons or explanations. She just exercises control on her daughter's sexuality through the generation of fear about everything related to the subject. Her main argument is that losing her virginity for a girl is a dishonor not only for her but for her whole family. In this context, Khadija tells the reader about Jennifer, one of her former American friends, whose older brother "looked at nasty magazines... All of them had naked ladies with huge breasts" (151). In one of her visits to Khadija's home, she brings some of these magazines to show them to the Arab American girl, and they get caught by Shahira. Once she realizes the content of the magazines, "she screamed curses like I have never heard," and sends Jennifer home. Then she "slapped my face, cursed me, cursed America, cursed my father, and cursed God. She burned the magazines and then the dinner" (152). This passage conveys the importance of the incident from the mother's point of view. Shahira's shock and subsequent reaction indicate her fear of finding herself face to face with what she considers America's ugly face, the one she has been struggling to protect her daughter from. She realizes the fragility of the line that she has drawn to separate her transplanted Arab household from American influence.

Nevertheless, Khadija does not rebel against the conservative upbringing she has received, which is not the case with her cousin Soraya. Her posture towards sexuality is shaped by her parents' Arab convictions that she obediently accepts. Once, Khadija is invited by her American friend Patricia for a slumber party. When she tells her friend about her parents' refusal to let her accept the invitation, Patricia replies:

"How are you ever going to have sex with a boy if you always have to sleep at home?"  
I felt funny, like she was laughing at me. I had never thought about sex with a boy before I got married. I know that American girls do that, and probably even my cousin Soraya, but that's different. (173)

Khadija's opinion obviously differs from her American peers' and even from her cousin Soraya's. Although she continuously identifies herself as American, she still cannot get rid of many aspects of the traditional upbringing she has received from her Arab parents. She admits here that she is different from American girls.

Khadija's attitude to sexuality can be clearly observed in the episode involving her two American friends Michael and Patricia, whom she accidentally sees having sex. One day after school, she goes to Patsy's house to do her homework. When Michael comes over after a while, Patsy tells Khadija that they are going to leave her alone and do their homework together in another room. After a long while, she decides to go after them, only to find them under the covers in the bedroom of Patsy's parents. Khadija is extremely shocked at what she has just seen:

I turned away and shut the door behind me. I felt horrible, like can't-see and can't-think kind of horrible. My books were all over the place and I couldn't stuff them in my bag fast enough. I ran from her front door to our house. Thinking about what I saw made me feel dirty, like when you go by a car crash and look by accident and on purpose at the same time, but then you feel sick because of what you saw. (179-80)

She is ashamed even to the point of feeling dirty for having witnessed this intimate scene between her friends. Hence, she decides to keep it as an "ugly secret" (178) because she has nobody to confess to and discuss this kind of topic.

However, it is at home that Khadija finds refuge to recover from this traumatic experience. Once back home, she finds her mother playing with her little brother, and she starts to cry. The following tender conversation then takes place,

"What's wrong little cucumber? Are you sick?"  
"Sick, sick," said Hamouda  
My mother hugged me and felt my forehead.  
"I think I'm getting sick," I told her. "Lots of the kids at school are sick," I lied.  
"You stay home with us and we'll make you better, won't we Hamouda."  
Hamouda looked at me and shouted, "Yes!" (180)



Khadija is terrified when she finds herself face to face with sexuality, from which she has been taught to stay away because it is something shameful and wrong for girls like her. She is terrified by the idea that sexuality, in contradiction to the conceptions that her Arab environment has transmitted to her, is actually close to her. Consequently, sexuality has become a disturbing and confusing factor leading to the girl's feeling of displacement within American culture, which explains her restoring to her Arab mother's arms to find comfort and to get healed from the harm caused by this particular aspect of American lifestyle.

Although she does not miss any opportunity to proclaim that she is American, Khadija has actually internalized much of her family's Palestinian cultural values. She realizes this, for instance, in the first visit she makes to Patsy's house. For her, "it was like walking into a TV show" (150). In this first contact with what can be labeled as an average American family, she observes the difference between her own family and Patsy's. She notes how her friend's father is concentrated on television without caring about his kids or talking with them, while the mother is out. After an hour or so, the latter comes back home bringing fried chicken for dinner. While Khadija gets excited because she never eats food from the outside, Patsy's six-year-old brother complains: "Again? We have to eat fried rats again?" (150). However, when Patsy is invited earlier to have dinner at Khadija's house, Shahira has proudly prepared "musakhan," a typical Palestinian dish, and French fries to the surprise of the American girl: "You *made* these French fries? They're not frozen? You cut them up and everything?" (149). Therefore, Shahira's overwhelming presence in her household is obviously contrasted with the absence of Patsy's mother, which delineates the divergence of their family patterns.

Khadija's mother summarizes cultural differences between Arab and American families when her daughter tells her that Patsy's brother is named after Mick Jagger. While the girl is amused at that, an astonished Shahira declares: "This is the problem with America! Instead of naming their children after family or prophets or heroes, they name them after rock stars. Who would believe such a thing?" (151). She believes that there is a huge gap separating her Arab culture from the American one. Moreover, she tries to make this cultural barrier clear to her daughter in order to warn her about the consequences of letting herself get corrupted by America, and more importantly to highlight that they do not belong there. This is exactly what Khadija's father incessantly reminds her about, too.

The father's rejection of America is the consequence of the frustration he feels due to his failed American dream. He is third mechanic at a repair shop which means that his job is not stable. Hence, he is not able to afford a comfortable life for his family because he is going through financial hardships. On the one hand, he constantly expresses his pain at being away from his country and his regret about the loss of Palestine. In fact, he repeatedly tells his daughter that, "my ache comes from losing my home" (39). On the other, his American experience is not a success story; his daughter expresses it thus: "My father has many dreams that have been filled with sand. That's what he tells me: 'This country has taken my dreams that used to float like those giant balloons, and filled them with sand. Now they don't float, and you can't even see what they are anymore'" (37). Consequently, as a man of unfulfilled dreams and suffering from nostalgia for his lost home country, Khadija's father finds refuge in alcohol turning into an aggressive and abusive father and husband, affecting in this way his family's lives and particularly his daughter's.

Khadija states that for her, “the scariest thing is: when he drinks. He doesn’t do it that often and he doesn’t have to drink that much before his eyes become bullets, his fists the curled hands of a boxer, and our living room the ring of *Monday Night Wrestling*” (38). Once, her drunk father forces her to drink some liquor despite her attempts to resist him. After that, he drags her violently to her mother and tells her that their daughter has been drinking. The girl describes this humiliating scene:

I remained where I was, but the fire went from my belly to his eyes and he pulled me by the arm and then by the ear and dragged me into the kitchen where my mother was cutting vegetables.

“Oh Mother of Shit,” he called to her. “Your little dog of a daughter has been drinking. Smell her mouth.”

My mother leaned over me and sniffed my mouth and I closed my eyes. She slapped my face and the fire came back to me.

“He made me drink it,” I screamed, and saw my father’s eyes enlarge.

“A drinker and a liar!” he shouted, and started hitting me everywhere. I screamed and screamed and finally got free and ran to my room. I opened the closet and closed the door behind me and prayed to God the fire would burn somewhere else. (38-39)

This is one of the scariest moments lived by Khadija showing the kind of abuse she has to endure from her violent and even cruel father. He manipulates a whole situation in order to create an opportunity to humiliate his daughter and at the same time insult his wife. Moreover, the scene displays Shahira as a passive mother who makes no efforts to establish a dialogue with her daughter. She just does not want to listen to the girl’s explanations and resorts to physical violence to punish her.

We witness this oppressive and abusive treatment that Khadija receives at home in some other episodes. For instance, Soraya mentions in her narrative the time when Khadija takes two dollars from her brother’s money in order to buy a barrette. The brother takes revenge on her and tells his father that he has seen his sister kissing a boy at school. “Khadija’s father didn’t ask her if it was true, he just came after her with a belt, yelling *slut* and *whore* at her. She didn’t go to school for two days, and the next

time I saw her she wouldn't look at me, just held her head down like her shoes were the prettiest things ever" (31). The aggressive father does not even give his daughter the opportunity to defend herself and claim her innocence. He directly resorts to violence and insults and humiliations to the girl's submission and passiveness.

Nevertheless, Khadija decides to put an end to her passive behavior towards her father's oppression just the day before Shahira's return from Palestine after visiting her dying mother. That day, the teenager realizes that her father has drunk a whole bottle of liquor which makes her feel that something scary is about to happen. Everything starts when her two-year-old brother Hamouda looks at his father and says "wild dog with a tick ass" (206). Khadija narrates what happens, and how her grandfather, Siddi, tries to intervene:

Baba sets on fire and I'm in the kitchen trying to be invisible and slap slap slap and the baby cries, so I go to see and Hamouda's arm is in my father's teeth and blood and then Siddi comes up to hold my father or to take the baby from him, and my father hits him hard, his own father, and knocks him to the floor and then goes back to the baby, who's just crying and crying and crying. (207)

The girl is extremely shocked to see the extent of her father's violence under the influence of alcohol. Not only is he able to hit his baby boy but also his old father. Khadija has heard her mother once say that "she thought Baba might be crazy because of all the things he did, but especially because he didn't respect his father properly" (192). Now she sees with her own eyes her father's disrespect and violence towards his own father in addition to the little baby, and decides to take action. "I do what I have never done. I run to the phone and dial 911 like they say to do in school" (207).

Khadija calls the police on her father to seek protection for her brothers and grandfather. Therefore, she uses what she has learnt at her American school against her Palestinian father. She puts into practice her American half despite her fear of what

could happen afterwards. “Scary is what is going to happen to us until Ma comes back. Scary is what Ma will do and if they’ll say it’s my fault” (208). Although she is scared of the consequence of her action, she tries to comfort her little brother as well as herself, “‘It’s okay little cucumber,’ I whisper in English in Hamouda’s ear. ‘We’ll be okay. We’ll be okay, God willing’” (208). The girl is aware that her action is a serious challenge to her parents’ homeland values and that she will be blamed for what might happen to her family consequently.

However, it seems that this experience has changed Khadija from a vulnerable passive teenager to a decisive and active young woman who stands against her father’s abuse and violence. This obvious turning point is an important step for Khadija’s process of self negotiation as she decides to abandon her submissive life. She raises the alarm to warn her parents about this dysfunctional household of theirs dominated by fear and violence. Khadija is actually branding her parents, and especially her abusive father, an opportunity to reconsider in order to change and try to make things work. The teenager has proved to be brave after all which will help her overcome the strong sense of displacement that she feels as an Arab American girl, and therefore try to reconcile the different elements interacting in her life. Steven Salaita states that “Khadija’s story does not have a happy ending, a fact that in itself undermines a cherished American mythology” (2011: 83), and this may well be true. However, the girl may seize this opportunity to make a fresh start as a new person who is able to take decisions, and therefore, becomes more comfortable in her in-between space and successfully conclude the negotiation of her identity as an Arab American woman in the United States.

### **3.2.4 Hala: The Bridge**

In comparison with her cousins, Hala seems to be the one who has succeeded, to a certain extent, in developing a double sense of belonging to both America and the Middle East. After a journey of self-searching between these two spaces, she ends up finding some balance in her negotiation process identifying herself as an Arab as well as an American. In this context, the girl performs the role of “a symbolic bridge between the two spaces culturally, politically, and physically” (Salaita 2011: 84). The metaphor of the bridge is actually recurrent in the literatures of all ethnic American groups. In this respect, in her study of the works of Chinese American writers, Amy Ling argues that “the person between worlds is in the indispensable position of being a bridge” (177). Hala’s character may be considered a personification of such a bridge. She is the daughter of a Jordanian father and the cousins’ aunt Huda, who at the age of seventeen moves from Jordan to the United States in order to finish high school and pursue university studies there. She has lived three years in Arizona with her uncle Hamdi and his American wife Fay, because of her mother’s desire to grant her the opportunity to live her own American experience and achieve, in this way, Huda’s own unfulfilled American dream.

Hala’s narrative starts when she takes the plane to return to Jordan to visit her dying grandmother after two years of absence. Curiously, her last visit there has been just after her mother’s death after her first year spent in America. Hala refers to that crucial moment of her life explaining that “as I started to grow and dream my mother died” (Halaby 2003: 9). Then, the girl realizes that what has changed the mind of her strongly opponent father is her mother’s being diagnosed with terminal cancer at the time. Huda has struggled hard to convince her husband to let Hala move to America.

Aware of the limitations imposed on women in Jordan, she aims to save Hala from all of these restrictions and give her the opportunity to live in a free country where she can continue her studies and go to college. In her attempts to convince her husband, she states that “If Hala stays here she will rot like me and Latifa. Look at us. We have rotted. Let Hala go and dream” (9). Huda knows that her daughter is very smart, which is why she deserves a better destiny than simply being the wife of someone with a role limited to raising kids. The only way for Hala to have a career, then, is to move away from Jordan.

Huda is willing to grant Hala freedom in order to allow her to dream and fulfill her dreams. In previous cases in this chapter, I have discussed the role entrusted to women to perpetuate female oppression and restrict young girls to the patriarchal social order. However, Huda does not fit in this category because, as opposed to other mothers, she is the one struggling hard to set her daughter free and send her out of the reach of restrictive Arab gender traditions. In this context, Fatima Mernissi addresses the issue concerning the glorification of traditions in the Arab world. She argues that “the return to the past, the return to tradition that men are demanding, is a means of putting things ‘back in order.’ An order that no longer satisfies everybody, especially not the women who have never accepted it” (1987: 24).<sup>43</sup> Mernissi argues that the past and traditions are used by men in order to restrict and control women and, thus, maintain female subjugation. In this sense, Huda’s aim is to break this chain of oppression when she stands up against her husband who “said there was not a chance in the world that he would let such a young girl go live in America with only a maternal uncle and his American wife” (Halaby 2003: 9). Nevertheless, that all changes with Huda’s terminal cancer diagnosis.

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<sup>43</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1987. Print

Huda's wish comes true when her husband finally accepts sending Hala to America. The girl describes her mother's reaction to this:

My mother was excited, perhaps because she thought I'd have a chance to finish what she barely started, or perhaps because she thought I'd have a freer education. Regardless, I was terrified at the thought of being away from my family, even though the idea of going to America – the America my mother had only tasted – was exciting. I was tired of being made fun of for reading, for being too headstrong, for speaking my mind. (9)

On the one hand, Hala becomes motivated to experience her own American dream as a way to compensate her mother. She feels the need to fulfill Huda's frustrated dreams when, as a consequence of lies and gossip about her behavior, she has been forced to return from America in disgrace and to marry an old foreigner.

Moreover, in spite of being scared to start this experience alone without her family, Hala longs to find a new place where she can realize herself and get rid of the displacement she feels in her own country within her own family. She mentions her always being criticized for the way she is and even for her love of reading, which has become a subject used to make fun of her. She explains this in the following excerpt:

I spent a lot of time alone reading, a source of embarrassment and concern for almost everyone in my family. "She will be blind before she is fifteen years old," Aunt Suha, my father's sister, would tell me every time she came over and found me bent over a book. "You shouldn't let her do this or no one will marry her."

My mother would nod, appeasing Aunt Suha enough to let the subject rest until the next time she came over. She never discouraged me, though, and liked to hear about the books I was reading, and read them herself if she had not done so previously. My father didn't approve of reading outside of school texts, and he used to take away my books when he came across them. (8)

Although encouraged by her mother and her brother Jalal, Hala feels the pressure of this kind of criticism which reveals a certain fear of the combination of women and books. Hence, the girl comes to realize that moving to America is the step she needs to take for her own sake and in order to find better conditions. Hala happily moves to America,



which seems to be a good option for her search to lead a different life where she can find happiness and feel fulfilled as a woman and as a professional as well.

However, Hala is back to square one again when she returns to Jordan for the first time after her mother's death. She gives an account of the episode when she has to confront her father who "not even two days into my mourning her death, he made it clear that he was going to be the one to make the decisions about my life from then on" (45). Therefore, after the loss of her protective mother, the girl finds herself face to face with her father's determination to exercise his authority over her, starting with his decision to keep her in Jordan. He tells his daughter that "it is time for you to be with your family. I'm sure you understand. You must think about life now, and plan to put your roots here as a woman" (45). She understands that her father obviously perceives her no longer as a little girl but as a grown up woman now ready for marriage.

Hence, Hala realizes her father's aim to reconstruct the chain of oppression that has been broken by her mother earlier in order to take away her new life and bring her back to the fate waiting for girls her age according to Arab traditions in Jordan. Hala ends up bravely confronting her father to let him know that he cannot take decisions for her anymore and that she is able to do so now herself:

A screen lifted from my eyes. I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to stay in Jordan forever. Marry – engaged even before high school was over. Have children. Be someone else's burden.

Maybe I spoke because I learned how to move my tongue like an American. Maybe it was just my grief that made me lose control. Or anger.

"I am going back with Hamdi and Fay."

"You will stay here. You have no more need for them."

Strength came holding the hand of rage. "My mother's wish was that I study in America. If I stay here, I will kill myself. I will go to my mother and then you will have the blood of two people on your hands." (45)

Hala clearly expresses her refusal to play the role of the obedient daughter here and to accept going back to the life she has already escaped. Moreover, she is aware of her

father's determination to take advantage of her mother's absence, which makes her understand that now she has to rely on herself and use all her weapons to stop him.

Hala even threatens to take her own life to rejoin her mother, implicitly accusing her father of Huda's death because marrying him has put an end to all her dreams. Hala refuses to let history repeat itself and states that she prefers to die rather than to endure her mother's frustrated life after her return from America. The girl explains her reaction as a mixture of anger together with the boldness she has learnt in America. The little girl who is used to speaking her mind seems to have polished her character during her stay away from Jordan, which leads her to win this time. Her father's answer is silence as he just walks away and does not say good-bye before she leaves for good back to the United States with Hamdi and Fay.

Two years after, this crucial moment of her life when she considers that "in one week I lost both my parents" (46), Hala decides to go back to Jordan because of her paternal grandmother's death. During her first few days, there she describes her contradictory feelings at being home again after years of absence as "a mixture of relief and fatigue" (77). The girl feels relieved and comfortable to be in her family's house again where she has lived most of her life, and also to be surrounded by people speaking her mother language. Nevertheless, this same situation makes her feel alienated because she knows that her own people perceive her as a foreigner after she has "walked so far away from them" (77). Her feeling of displacement is enhanced by her difference from her own people as even her looks do not really match Jordanian standards. She expresses her discomfort and alienation arguing that:

I know they see me with curious eyes. I left before marrying age. I have finished high school and I should be coming back for marriage, not for death. I should have longer hair, I should wear makeup. I should not wear blue jeans and "extremely unfeminine dresses," as Aunt Suha says. I should stop using English words. Nila, one of my classmates at the American school just married and is pregnant. I am unconnected. (77)

Therefore, Hala's experience of crossing borders from Jordan to America and her three-year stay there has kept her away from her own culture. She even feels unconnected to the land she comes from together with its traditions and lifestyle, which leads to her social and cultural alienation. Not only does she feel herself a stranger but she is perceived as such by others, as well. Hence, in the first couple of weeks back in Jordan, Hala is experiencing a denial of belonging from her own people and also a feeling of not belonging from her side.

The girl's feeling of detachment starts as soon as she sees the house, which she does not recognize due to her mother's absence. She states that "everything is white. The house is white, the yard is white tile, and the six-foot wall that borders the house is white. White, white, white, white to blind the morning sun, as though they were in competition" (78). While the color white is commonly associated with purity, cleanliness, softness, perfection and a soothing effect, among other qualities, in this case we perceive that the excessive use of it leads to an opposite effect. Hala's description of the blinding whiteness covering everything surrounding her home implies a feeling of coldness, isolation and emptiness. Therefore, the girl finds herself in a house devoid of any warmth, affection and attachment, and that only inspires lifelessness and disconnection through its blank walls. Hala feels that the house's soul has left it with her mother's decease, and this prevents her from connecting with her family circle again, and intensifies her feeling of not belonging.

Apart from the very cold relationship with her father, Hala does not feel any connection with her elder sister Latifa either: "It occurs to me that Latifa and I share nothing, except our mother" (78). For instance, Hala is not even really bothered by her sister's cold and sometimes aggressive attitude towards her. She knows that Latifa does

not like her because she has never been allowed the freedom she is enjoying, and also because she is lighter than her. Hala adds: “Latifa’s words don’t make me angry. It’s as if I am watching two people talking as they face a white wall, but I have no connection to them” (79). Hence, Hala just lets everything pass over her and does not pay much attention to her sister; she does not even make any effort to have a real conversation with her or to get involved with her in anything.

Hala has lived for two weeks as a stranger in her own home trying to avoid arguments with her sister and her father. Unable to connect with the people and places around her, she finds refuge in her happy memories, almost all of which are associated with her mother. She is convinced that she is in Jordan only on vacation and she will not hesitate to defy her father again if he tries to plan her wedding::

I am not ready to marry at all. I know this. And if I stay here, I might come to feel differently. And then I will be like my mother. The Woman of Unfulfilled Dreams. Better to be like Uncle Hamdi, The Voice of Reason and Capitalism. If I stay I will be one of my father’s jokes too. A joke that makes nobody laugh. (83)

Therefore, for now Hala prefers to escape her father’s authority and the habitual fate of being a frustrated woman in Jordan. She adds: “I remain unconnected, like a charm without a chain to hang, I’m happy” (83). Her happiness is related to her ability to contest her father’s impositions and to refuse to follow the traditions she is not convinced by. She is aware of the freedom she enjoys, and this brings satisfaction and happiness to her, as well. Hence, the girl’s disconnection has marked the beginning of her stay in Jordan until the day she meets her older cousin Sharif who becomes her connection to her homeland.

Sharif is an important figure of Hala’s childhood who has just come back from Europe after years of studying and working there. They have not been in contact for many years, which makes the girl, at the moment of their encounter, expect some

change to take place. “I feel a wave inside of me, as though a giant change is about to occur” (119). He offers to take her on tours across Jordan to visit some of the important spots. “I am a professional tour guide. I would be delighted to reacquaint you with your homeland. One of your homelands, at least” (120). Sharif expresses his intention to reconnect Hala with her country and her Arab culture through these planned visits to places and traditions she seems to have lost touch with.

In the first guided tour, Sharif takes Hala and her sister Latifa to the city of Ajlun to visit its twelfth century castle. During the drive to Ajlun, Hala starts her real journey back to her homeland when the surrounding landscape manages to move her. “I watch the hills and trees and villages, imagining the people who live there, wondering if my mother thought of her village every time she drove by Jordanian villages. Being away has made me see the country as more beautiful. I’m even enjoying Latifa” (132). Hence, going back to this familiar landscape makes the girl think of her mother and of course of Palestine, which is one of her homelands, as Sharif has stated earlier. In addition, she starts to feel at ease the moment she lets her senses intertwine with her memories. She comes to enjoy the experience to the point that she recognizes the beauty of the landscape and appreciates her sister’s company, which would have been unimaginable a few hours earlier.

The culmination of Hala’s reconnection with her land in this first trip occurs when she gets into the castle:

Up and up and up and we reach the highest part of the castle, which looks out over a small valley. We sit there silently for what seems like a very long time, legs dangling over the edge and a story here and there to fill our ears. It is like sitting with the oldest friends in the world, no words are necessary, but when they come, they are most welcome. For the first time since I have been back, I feel at peace. (133)

Hala starts to see everything surrounding her with different eyes, and most importantly she comes to feel comfortable and at ease thanks to Sharif who is making an effort to introduce the girl to places and traditions she has lost touch with. Moreover, she recognizes that the man's presence has brought about a lot of positive things to her life. She describes the wind of change that has definitely impacted her perception of everything: "With this day, a new chapter of my life begins, a new beginning after my grandmother's death. Sharif comes over every day to take us somewhere: to the *souq*, the mall, visiting friends or relatives, to Jerash, to Ajlun, wherever our hearts desire. This is the perfect way to come home and taste it all over again" (134).

Therefore, this new chapter that has just started in Hala's life is related to Sharif's presence, that has paved the way for her reconciliation with her past to the point that she regains peace in her Arab environment and consequently, she finds some balance between her Arabness and her new American present. The man plays the role of the intermediary that reconnects the girl with Jordan, the same way that he has done to little Hala with Palestine. The girl's memory takes her back to an incident that takes place on the beach of the city of Aqaba, on the Red Sea, during a family outing. The twenty-year-old Sharif asks the five-year-old Hala if she wants to go back home. The following conversation takes place between them:

"Let's swim home," he says with his face still in the sun. "Home? This beach won't reach to Amman. How can we swim there if there is no water?" I try to stay still so my shell will come back. "I mean to Palestine." He turns to look at me. "We can't swim to Palestine." "Why not? She's right there." He points to the right, below the sun. We are so close that we can see the houses on the shore. "That's Palestine?" He nods, still looking, I feel funny inside. "We're not allowed to go there. It's not our home anymore." The water is very blurry now. "Says who?" He stares at me with his hands in fists at his waist. (125)

They take a paddleboat and paddle far away from the shore until they are stopped by a Jordanian military motorboat. The soldiers tell them that they cannot cross the border,

and if they do so the Israelis will stop and even hurt them. They take them back to the shore to find the whole family standing there angrily waiting for them. Hala's mother is so angry that she starts shouting at Sharif for taking his cousin into such deep waters. The little girl defends him shouting back and explaining that, "We tried to go home!" (129). At that moment, her mother softens her tone towards the boy and gently takes her daughter in her arms.

This episode reveals the complexity of Hala's sense of belonging as well as the complex notion of home that has dominated her from an early age and becomes even more complicated by her stay in the United States. The Aqaba experience makes little Hala realize that she is not allowed to reach Palestine although she can see it from the paddle boat. This scene, in fact, makes reference to the Palestinians' inability to return to their land due to the actual geopolitical circumstances imposed by the Israeli colonization. It is actually one of the important themes recurrently dealt with by Halaby, who explains in an interview that "Palestine has always been central to my writing. Love of land, loss, exile, forcible removal, the physical beauty of land being bittersweet because it is so often seen through memory rather than today's life... these themes have always intrigued me, especially as they relate to identity" (Salaita 2008: 4).<sup>44</sup> Hence, even Hala's image of Palestine comes mainly from the portion of it she has seen from the Jordanian side of the Red Sea as a little girl, together with her mother's memories and Sharif's stories.

It is clear that Sharif has played an important role in developing the girl's consciousness about the notion of home. Thanks to him, Hala becomes aware of the complexity of home in her case, including both Jordan as well as Palestine. Now, Sharif has even become the symbol of the idea of home and all the positive things related to it

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<sup>44</sup> Salaita, Steven. "Interview With Laila Halaby." *RAWI Newsletter* (Summer 2008)

taking into account his contribution to Hala's reconciliation with her homeland. She realizes that her cousin "is making me see my country in a way I never have" (Halaby 2003:134). In addition, he makes her "become self-conscious, not in a pretty/ugly way, just aware of myself and my body" (134). Therefore, Hala ends up falling in love with him because he has made her feel the meaning of belonging to somewhere and being loved and cared about, to such an extent that her attachment to him and to her homeland increases every time she goes out with him.

Nevertheless, Hala becomes scared of these growing feelings towards her cousin, and consequently towards Jordan. She considers that "Sharif is with me more and more. I feel a smothering feeling; I am losing control. Of what? I am not in love with him. I need to get away" (136). Even though Hala is delighted by the new feelings she is experiencing for the first time in her life, her fear of losing control of her emotions makes her decide to take a break away from Amman, and especially, away from her cousin. The girl is aware now that her freedom is at risk if she gets closer to him. She understands that falling in love with Sharif and having a closer relationship with him would end up in marriage, which would mean staying in Jordan and giving up her freedom for ever. But Hala does not have the intention of sacrificing the freedom she is enjoying because it is one of the bonds that deeply attaches her to her mother's memory. In fact, this freedom is the result of the struggle started by the mother and then continued by the daughter.

Therefore, Hala decides to escape and pay a visit to her mother's uncle Abu Salwan in the city of Irbid, where she spends some days. During this visit, she has the opportunity to get immersed, once more, in the heart of Jordan. This experience is so important as it allows the girl to get to appreciate freedom and Arab culture and traditions equally. She spends more than a week enjoying family life and her relatives'



generosity, together with Abu Salwan's stories and memories about her mother. The most telling experience during her stay in Irbid is definitely her visit to the ancient archeological city of Petra with her cousin Fawziyya. Hala is excited about it because her mother always wanted to visit this city built in the rocks by the Nabateans in 312 BC but never had the opportunity to do it. Then, the girl fulfills one of her mother's wishes and she even climbs up to the top to reach the Place of Sacrifice.

Once there, she realizes that it is possible to climb higher and she continues up with her cousin. "This time it is just a smooth slant of gray-black-purple rocks that look like nothing I have seen before. We are higher than anything else. We are looking down on the tops of the other mountains... We are in the sky so high that we are in the same level as the blue" (156). Reaching the top of the rocks makes Hala amazed by the views and most importantly by the feeling of being so close to the sky. She feels freedom in its purest forms, which leads her to take off her clothes and expose her body directly to the sun. "We let the sun tickle us for what seems like hours, but is probably five or ten minutes—long enough that our clothes dry" (157).

This experience has led Hala to see many things differently, bringing her close to her country's ancient history to take her high enough to reach the sky and in this way reinforce her appreciation of her freedom. She notices that "a week and a half in Irbid and I feel I have slept a month and awoken with clear eyes... I am very happy today. I love to drive in the car and put my hand out the window to catch the breezes" (193). The girl comes to realize that she can belong to this country and feel proud of its history and civilization, while at the same time living in the United States. She understands that her recent closeness to her Arab family values will not prevent her from enjoying American freedom. Therefore, Hala becomes aware of the possibility of negotiating both worlds she belongs to and finding a bridge to connect them.

Back in Amman after this trip, the girl is relieved to learn her father's final decision to send her back to the United States in order to finish her studies. She overhears her father talking to a friend of his about her:

Two months she has been here and I really have no idea what to do with her, so I am going to put her on a plane back to the States. Hala is a kind girl and, you are right, very different from the others. She has her mother's spirit. I was prepared to marry her to someone – a relative – a very good man who would have been a good match for her, but imagine this: he refused me . . . He refused me because he thinks she needs to choose her own life. 'If I have true love for her, which I must in order to marry her, I must allow her to be free. This is why I refuse you.' Imagine a man telling a father what to do with his own daughter. (195)

The girl expresses her "gigantic relief" when she says that "I feel I have been granted the greatest freedom" (197). Nevertheless, she cannot prevent herself from feeling rejected by the man her father has chosen for her as a husband – Sharif –especially after she learns that he is about to get engaged to someone else. Hala is surprised by the anger she is feeling towards her cousin, who has not only turned down her father's offer to marry her but also has the intention of marrying another woman. She denies her feelings once more: "After all, I am not in love with him" (197).

It is important to shed light on Sharif's refusal to marry Hala based on his belief that she will not be happy if she stays in Jordan. He gives priority to the girl's comfort and happiness over his own feelings. The reason is that he is the one who understands her most because he has lived an experience similar to hers. As he points out, "I have explored the world and have come back to settle. You are seeing it for the first time. I think you have come back to say good-bye" (197). Therefore, Sharif prefers to sacrifice his love for Hala in order to let her enjoy her freedom and all the experiences and opportunities waiting for her before she takes the decision to get married. He knows very well that she would not accept her father and himself making plans and taking decisions for her. He is aware that he is unable to make Hala happy keeping her in

Jordan because she does not fit in there anymore. As he tells her, “I am an older man and I cannot give you what you need. I would be always good to you, I would always love you, but I am too old to expect what I have to offer you is enough to keep you happy” (199). Sharif believes that Hala should keep her freedom of choice in order to fulfill her ambitions as she pleases and break the “Woman of the Unfulfilled Dreams” tradition.

Despite her absolute rejection of the idea of marriage from the very beginning, Hala gets confused because of her feelings towards Sharif, on the one hand, and his rejection of her father’s offer to marry her, on the other. The feeling of rejection does not allow her to be completely relieved and happy about her father’s decision to let her go back to the United States. However, Sharif helps her find her way once more as she decides not to change her plans to return to America to finish her schooling. In fact, it is relevant to highlight the role played by Sharif in guiding Hala in her trip of reconciliation with her Arab culture and helping her to find some balance on both sides of the hyphen. He is the one who has helped her most in this self-search to refresh her identity and to construct her hybrid character.

Hala’s process of identity negotiation is reflected in her very trip back to Arizona. To the astonishment of her father, she decides to wear a traditional Palestinian embroidered *roza* that had belonged to her mother. “Why must you wear that? You know it is not appropriate. You are not going to a village or for a visit to someone. You are flying to America! Miss Modern Lady Who Had Almost No Interest In Dresses Until Today, why can’t you wear your beloved jeans like you do all the time?” (203). The girl insists on wearing this *roza* in particular because it was embroidered by her grandmother, which symbolizes the continuity of this Palestinian tradition and the grandmother-mother-daughter connection. It symbolizes as well the girl’s attachment to

her roots enhanced by the gold charm of Palestine that she wears round her neck and that Sharif has given to her. Therefore, Hala is not disconnected anymore from her Arab culture and roots like she has felt in her early days in Jordan. On the contrary, she becomes so close to her homeland that she tries to carry a bit of it with her to America.

Once in the plane, the girl feels comfortable and confident, unlike during her outbound flight towards Amman. "I am not at all nervous on this flight. There is no mystery and no worrying. No one is expecting a face I cannot offer. No, this flight is quiet" (204). Now Hala is aware of the new experiences that are waiting for her in America to carry on her process of identity construction and her Third Space negotiation. She feels that she is a new person willing to have a new start which can include her Arab homeland and America:

I am starting over, starting over. My mother is always with me. My father has not abandoned me, and Sharif has introduced me to something wonderful. It is time to start something new, and something old, not to fix something unfinished. I will watch just the right way, to see the underside of things, the thinking things and the forgetting things, as my mother used to say. And then I will start university, and I will not come back in disgrace. (204)

Hence, Hala is eager to experience her identity negotiation in her American home with all the memories and stories she has brought with her from the Arab homeland. She wants to seal her belonging to these two worlds and cultivate her relations with both. Her past matters as much as her present because she needs to be close to her Arab roots and also enjoy her life in the United States. Her mother's memory is so crucial that she wants to dedicate her future success to her; in no way will she go back to Jordan in disgrace.

Hala does not forget her father either who has finally shown his affection for, and understanding of, his daughter by allowing her to return to America. The girl is grateful that he comes to understand her and think about what is best for her. She is also

relieved to know that he is proud of her and that he will always be there for her. The most important people in Hala's life after her mother are undoubtedly her father and Sharif. These two male figures have a very positive impact on the girl's life. The latter has shown her the meaning of love and has made possible her reconciliation with her Arab homeland, while the former has not deprived her from her freedom nor has he stood as an obstacle to her future in America. The writer here tries to do away with the generalized image of Arab men who in the West are mostly portrayed as cruel and violent creatures oppressing women. Moreover, labeling Arab women as subservient to men does not take into account the individual experiences of millions of them who daily struggle to release themselves from the restrictions and limitations of traditions. Therefore, it simplifies the lives of these women and ignores the diversity and richness of their experiences. Hala is free and not oppressed. She has the freedom to find her own way and to enjoy her hyphenated experience.

Back in Hamdi and Fay's house in Arizona, Hala realizes her need to make a familiar and suitable environment of it. She notices for the first time the bare walls of the house:

The house is decorated in high-class American style, no knickknacks, no faded pictures, and no Muhammad mosaics. Neat encyclopedia, nineteen matching volumes. High-class halogen bulbs. Chairs that make you cross your legs... High-class American blah, no soul, no colors, only outside walls that wandered in and stayed. Show-off house with no heart nor fancy bracelets.

Funny how this never bothered me before, how I almost didn't notice it.  
(217)

Hala here feels bothered by her uncle's lifeless house, which leaves no room for imagination because of its white and empty walls devoid of any reference to anything.

This critical perception makes her compare it with her parents' house in Jordan where

every nook and cranny [was] filled with something: a plant, a book, a statue, a flower, and every wall was covered with religious plaques,

calendars, photographs...Always somewhere to look to take you somewhere else, to make you think. Either a memory resurrected or a new place to go or a joy to feel. Only way you could not think in our house would be if you closed your eyes and imagined nothing, which is impossible. No spare wall space. No place for thoughts to stop. (217)

Hence, Hala compares the sterility of the American decoration with the liveliness of her Arab home, which reveals her mixed feelings of nostalgia and discomfort. The house belongs to her uncle Hamdi who “is trying to fit in” (217) and his white American wife Fay. The girl makes a connection between this high-class American style and whiteness, realizing, therefore, that she does not feel at home there either.

Hala thus becomes aware that the home she has chosen is not enough for her and that she cannot fit in. She understands that in order to live in this neat and cold white house, “I need clutter and memories” (218). In fact, thanks to her memories of the Arab homeland with all of these people, places and smells, “the white walls are softer” (219). The girl points out the importance of rescuing her memories in her American home in order to fill up all the empty spaces:

Remember for yourself and for your tomorrow, my mother used to say. Remember to make your day new and old, but be sure to think of something you never thought of before. If you don't, your life will be like having your foot stuck in a mouse hole, looks small and harmless, but holds on tight and won't let you go until something comes along to change the landscape.

Hala becomes aware of the importance of her past in order to give a meaning to her present life, which makes her incorporate some elements related to the Arab homeland she is longing for now. She spreads the pictures that she has brought with her from Jordan all over her bedroom; these are pictures of her parents, her sister Latifa, her grandmother, and of course Sharif. She even gets some posters of Morocco and Egypt to hang on her walls because they are the closest to Jordan that she has found at the mall's travel agency.

Therefore, the girl's bedroom has become the site for her memories, which are an essential part of her identity as well as an important link between her past and present. Moreover, all of the objects related to her Arab culture that she has gathered in her bedroom evoke the girl's past, which plays a crucial role in the determination of her ongoing process of identity negotiation.

By the evening the bare walls are bearable, lively, different and familiar. I sit on the floor and stare, then close my eyes. It is deep nighttime in Amman – and in Nawara – and I have tucked my memories under a scratchy blanket, wishing them the sweetest dreams as I open my eyes to a new, but not unfamiliar world. (220)

The girl ends her narrative, as well as the novel, with the formula that she has adopted to overcome her displacement in order to convert her environment into a familiar and comfortable place where she intends to put into practice the negotiation of her hybridity. Hala is eager to enjoy her multilayered identity in the United States while not forgetting anything she has left behind in Jordan as well as Palestine.

*West of the Jordan* projects a gallery of female characters whose stories reflect the heterogeneity of Arab American women and the multiplicity of their experiences. Laila Halaby proposes identification options for her four young protagonists whose identities, while they negotiate their spaces in diaspora, are shaped and re-shaped on a daily basis. In an interview published on the Beacon Press website, Halaby states that “each one has had to deal with a blow to her security blanket, which has in turn launched her into adulthood or at least into accepting responsibility, or ownership, for where she is in life. Each one has learned about herself and her history and has had to come to terms with it a bit more.”<sup>45</sup> While these young women tell their stories, their different perspectives and opinions reflect their differing experiences and their multiple

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.beacon.org/Assets/ClientPages/WestOfTheJordanrg.aspx#interview>

cultural identities. Hence, the novel displays the writer's intention to challenge the widespread homogeneous depiction of Arab women in mainstream American consciousness and correct the stereotypical portrayals of Arab women as static and helpless submissive beings. The novel brings to light the unheard stories and experiences of a whole community through the freshness of these young protagonists. These teenagers, actually, stand for thousands of young women who represent the new generations of Arab American women, and whose stories are an essential component of the memory of the whole Arab American community.



## **CHPATER 4**



## CHAPTER 4

### ***CRESCENT* AND THE CREATIVE STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE**

The manuscript for *Crescent* (2003) was submitted days before 9/11. After the terrorist attacks, Diana Abu-Jaber thought about setting the book aside due to her doubts about the American audience's reception of a novel about Iraq, and the beauty of Arab civilization, poetry, music and food, while she herself was receiving flyers under the door of her Portland University office about rounding up the Arabs. She decided, however, to go on with the project, so *Crescent* was published in April 2003, curiously when Baghdad was being bombed by U.S. forces. These inauspicious circumstances that accompanied the birth of this novel added more significance to its content.

*Crescent* was highly acclaimed by both Arab and Arab American critics as they dubbed it as lush, timely, and wise. Tired of the American public ignorance of the politics and culture of the Middle East, Abu-Jaber challenges the negative American media portrayal of Arabs, through a story of love, jealousy and betrayal, of searching for a sense of belonging in a new country, but with roots in the old, all mingled with the beauty of storytelling and the delicious Middle Eastern cuisine. The novel is set in Los Angeles, in the neighborhood of "Teherangeles" inhabited by a large number of Iranians and some other Middle Easterners. The central character is Sirine, a thirty-nine-year-old Iraqi American who lives with her uncle and works as a chef at an Arab restaurant, Nadia's Café, owned by the Lebanese Um-Nadia. In the course of the novel, she falls in love with Hanif El-Eyad (Han), an Iraqi exile who works as a professor of linguistics at UCLA University. The novel revolves around their romance and the consequent negotiations of Arab and American identities and culture, with the diverse collection of

characters from different ethnic backgrounds around them contributing to such negotiations.

*Crescent* (2003) is a hybrid novel whose structure is based on two main elements: Sirine's cuisine and her uncle's storytelling. In this way, the novel moves easily between the classic narration of oral Arabic tradition and modern Western fiction in order to question misconceptions about Arabs in American literature and popular culture. Abu-Jaber depicts the experiences of Arabs and Arab American characters and emphasizes their hyphenated identities as Arabs and as Americans, thus engaging with the problems that the members of her community encounter. Steven Salaita highlights the importance of the Arab American presence in the American context and argues that "artistic growth can play a crucial role in the external interpretation, acceptance, and humanization of Arab Americans and the Arab people as a whole."<sup>46</sup>

Hence, the main aim of this chapter is to explore Abu-Jaber's creative strategies of resistance to the mainstream rigid and narrow portrayal of Arabs in the United States, taking into account the complexity of the context in which Arab American writers are producing their work. The writer challenges these widespread stereotypes and misconceptions of the members of the Arab American community, which play an important role in the marginalization of the group in America's political, social and cultural contexts. I will, therefore, examine the alternative representations offered by the novelist in order to challenge these stereotypical depictions. Moreover, I will probe the in-between spaces provided by the novel where the hybrid characters articulate their selfhood and search for strategies of negotiation. Then, I will investigate the role of food as a human connector bridging differences within and between ethnic communities.

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<sup>46</sup> Salaita, Steven. "Vision: Arab-American Literary Criticism," *Al Jadid Magazine*, 8 (2002).  
< <http://www.aljadid.com/content/vision-arab-american-literary-criticism> >

#### **4.1 *Crescent's* Engagement with the Issue of the Image of Arabs in the United States**

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I tried to trace the Arab American experience in the United States from the end of the nineteenth century until today. I have also tried to trace the historical circumstances which have led to the present negative media representations of Arabs in America. The main consequence of this long process of tutoring U.S. audiences about the evil Arab “Other” is that the Arab American community has been reduced to a handful of essentialist constructions and negative stereotypes that conceal its complexity and diversity. In fact, “All we can see on the TV and movies about Arabs is they’re shooting someone, or kidnapping someone... Those are the choices. The only lines they get to say are: ‘*Shut up and sit down!*’ (Abu-Jaber 2003: 188). In this context, *Crescent* (2003) echoes Jack Shaheen’s study about most Hollywood movies which “effectively show all Arabs, Muslims, and Arab-Americans as being at war with the United States” (2003: 172). He adds that these “rigid and repetitive portraits narrow [the audience’s] vision and blur reality” (2000: 26). More importantly, he warns us about the dangerous and growing effect if these images remain unchallenged.

Abu-Jaber is aware of this reality which leads her to touch on this issue since at the very beginning of her novel when she mentions the story of the former owner of Nadia’s Café, an Egyptian cook. During the Gulf War of 1991, the Café started to be visited on a daily basis by two men in business suits who used to just observe the Middle Eastern students and take notes, so “people started whispering: C. I. A.” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 8). Gradually, the number of customers got reduced and the business failed:

One day, after a month of sitting at the counter, the two men took the cook aside and asked if he knew of any terrorist schemes developing in

the Arab American community. The poor man's eyes grew round, his hands grew slippery with sweat and cooking grease, he squeezed his spatula till it hurt his palm; he saw the twin images of his own frightened face in the dark lenses of one of the stranger's glasses. He'd never heard of such a thing in his life. He and his wife liked to watch *Colombo* at night: that was all he knew about intrigues or crime. He thought he was living in America. (8)

Abu-Jaber here highlights the environment of skepticism that follows each crisis that occurs in the Middle East as every Arab/Arab American becomes the target of rejection and suspicion. So this Egyptian cook realizes that America is not the land of freedom he expected it to be, at least not for him and his fellow Arabs, just through the mere fact of being who they are. Here, again, it is important to remember mainstream American media which

represents Arab Americans and Muslim Americans in a manner that mostly operates to differentiate them from other Americans. The ordinariness of and internal differences among Arab Americans and Muslim Americans is at time subtly and at time crassly subverted through a series of direct and indirect associations and representations, the effects of which are to essentialize and racialize Arab Americans and Muslim Americans and represent them in their "collective," essentialized identities, rather than their individualities or differences. (Joseph, D'Harlingue and Wong, 234)

Therefore, this differentiation of Arabs and Arab Americans undermines the non-prejudiced vision of America as a land of immigrants. After all, not all immigrants are equal, especially if they have an Arab background.

Sirine often thinks about the story of the former Egyptian owner of the restaurant, "Sometimes she used to scan the room and imagine the word *terrorist*. But her gaze ran over the faces and all that came back to her were words like *lonely* and *young*" (Abu-Jaber 2003: 8). The writer here challenges the almost automatic identification of Arabs with terrorism in the American imagination, classifying them, in

this way, as the enemy. But Sirine is unable to identify that enemy among the regulars of Um-Nadia's Café as she looks at them beyond the stereotypes. She thinks that "everything about these young men seemed infinitely vulnerable and tender" (8), because they are just students and immigrants suffering from being away from home. Abu-Jaber even makes a humorous diagnosis of what she calls "the Arab disease" that is "where you keep thinking the C. I. A. is following you around" (106). In this way, she comes to the realization of how difficult it is to be an Arab nowadays: "No one ever wants to be the Arab—it's too old and too tragic and too mysterious and too exasperating and too lonely for anyone but an actual Arab to put up with for very long. Essentially, it's an image problem" (38).

Hence, the novel's engagement with this image issue that faces the Arab American community is illustrated in its attempt to demonstrate the unfairness of stereotyping Arabs and Arab Americans through the alternative gallery of varied characters it presents. The novel claims a space for the Arab American community within the larger multicultural mosaic of American society. Thus, Abu-Jaber deconstructs the stereotyped representations of Arabs and Arab Americans in the American imaginary and provides, instead, what she considers fairer images of them. She presents, for instance, the urbane intellectual Arab man, who is rarely portrayed in American media, through the characters of Han the professor, for instance.

One of the Café's regulars, Han is a distinguished exiled Iraqi scholar who has just joined UCLA. He is presented as a successful, charismatic and handsome man who "frequently has an entourage of students in his wake, young men – and some women – who tentatively follow him, asking his opinion of things" (11). He has attracted Sirine's attention since his first visits to the restaurant. "Her main impressions of Hanif are of his hair, straight and shiny as black glass, and of a faint tropical sleepiness to his eyes.

And there is his beautiful, light accented, fluid voice, dark as chocolate. His accent has nuances of England and Eastern Europe, like a complicated sauce” (11). This depiction of Han contrasts with the common representations of Arab male characters in American media. As Shaheen argues, characters representing Arab men in Hollywood all look the same: “Black beard, headdress, dark sunglasses. In the background – a limousine, harem maidens, oil wells, camels. Or perhaps he is brandishing an automatic weapon, crazy hate in his eyes and Allah on his lips” (2008: 172). Thus, Abu-Jaber gives Han a totally different image from that familiar to the American audience when she presents him as an attractive man, as well as an admirable lover and academic. He even shows his respect for Um-Nadia every time they meet, bowing to her and kissing her hands.

Abu-Jaber points to the experience of exile through the character of Han who describes himself as a “*ghazal*” or an oryx which “is always wandering, looking for his lost love, and they say he has to go away before he can find his way home again” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 29). In an interview with Andrea Shalal-Esa, Abu-Jaber talks about exile:

I feel that especially in the political gestalt we’re in right now, exile has become a particularly pointed question, more so than immigration. Immigration, at least from the Arab American point of view, was just more innocent and – I don’t want to say naïve – but it had a kind of hopefulness and optimism that wasn’t as charged by issues of race and politics as it is now. Particularly for Palestinians and Iraqis, a lot of them are not choosing to emigrate, but rather they’re fleeing political persecution or they’ve lost their homes. It’s an act that is not entirely of their own volition. I’m very interested in what the loss of a homeland means for someone. (5)

According to Edward Said, “exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (2000: 171). Seen in this light, *Crescent* (20003) sets out to give a human face to the



Iraqi exile experience through Han, who since an early age has “never [felt] entirely safe, always wanting to run far away” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 63). When Sirine asks him if he thinks that he could live there, in America, he replies: “That’s what I’m trying to find out” (60). His answer reveals that, despite all the terrifying memories he holds from his childhood and youth, he is actually never entirely away from Iraq.

Hanif is haunted by the memories of his homeland as he frequently thinks back to the different phases of his life there. He remembers the poor household where he was brought up and his parents’ economic difficulties preventing them from affording a comfortable life for their children, Hanif, his brother Arif and his sister Leila. In spite of that, he was a gifted student who worked hard and even “sat under the street lamps outside to do his studying because they couldn’t afford electricity” (205). At the age of fourteen, his parents accepted the offer made by an American woman, with whom he secretly had an affair, to give him the opportunity to attend a boarding school in Cairo and to cover all the necessary expenses. He points out that this “was my first escape from Iraq” (220).

Back in Baghdad after spending five years in Cairo, Han feels alienated in his own home:

I came back from Cairo obsessed with just about everything cultural – literature, painting, drama... I said and did as much as I could to cause my parents as much unhappiness as possible. I was always angry with them – I felt as if I had gone on to a new place in my life while they had remained stubbornly behind. Now I saw our poverty all around us – everything – the dirt floor in our house, the wrapped glass in our windows – all of it offended me. At night the sky flashed with bombs; it was impossible to sleep. I had nightmares of flying in pieces through the air. (281)

Han recognizes that during his Cairo experience, “I grew out of the curve of my family and home. Maybe I turned into something different than I was born to be” (220). After

being spared the hardships endured by his peers in his native Iraq, it was not easy for him to get adapted again to the life he had left behind. In the same year that he returned to Baghdad, Saddam Hussein took over, and in the following year declared war on the neighboring Iran. In this case, home has not changed that much during his absence, but he is the one who is not the same anymore. After having access to an exquisite Western education and enjoying a vibrant cultural life in Cairo, he came back to the same poor household. Consequently, all the dreams he had had during his private school years got crushed by the reality of dictatorship and war. All of his aspirations for freedom were suppressed by Saddam Hussein's regime, which led him to start writing against it in an underground newspaper under the pseudonym of Ma'al. When the security police learnt about these dissident writings, they assaulted his parents' house looking for him. They arrested his twelve-year-old brother who identified himself as Ma'al in order to cover him. Later, his sister got arrested as well and then killed. Hanif ended up escaping to England.

Thus, Han's exilic experience is interwoven with these traumatic memories of persecution and oppression. Moreover, it is marked by the feeling of guilt about what happened to his family because of him, and more importantly about his inability to return to Iraq to help them. After twenty years in exile, he does not even know if his brother is still alive, which makes his exilic experience "so painful. The frustration. And just not knowing" (109). He further explains that "the fact of exile is bigger than everything else in my life" (152) because it delineates the very meaning of his own existence. This fact is so painful to the point that "there's some part of me that can't quite grasp the thought of never returning. I have to keep reminding myself. It's so hard to imagine. So I just tell myself: not yet" (52). For him, home is what Avtar Brah refers to as a "mythic place and a place of no return" (1996: 192). Therefore, in spite of Han's

awareness about the impossibility of returning to Baghdad, he is unable to thoroughly live his American experience because his imagination is constantly taking him to Iraq and then back to America, and the other way round. As Edward Said explains “for an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (2000: 186).

So, when Sirine asks him to tell her about Iraq, he describes his homeland through “a feeling.” He explains:

It’s like sometimes I feel like I can sense the ghosts of all sorts of invisible cities and places that used to be there, on that land – the Chaldean Empire and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and – I’m not telling this very well. The night there seems to start two thousand years ago, it’s so light and dry – a bit like this night... And then there’s my parents’ house. (Abu-Jaber 2003: 63)

Despite all the alienating experiences undergone in his home country, Han expresses his deep attachment to it. “I miss everything, Sirine. Absolutely everything” (51). He insists that Iraq has to be felt and experienced through the senses. Therefore, *Crescent* (2003) aims to humanize not only the Iraqi exiles through the figure of Han, but also all the characters he mentions in his stories and memories about his homeland. Abu-Jaber presents a humanized image of Iraq, a country omnipresent on TV news in American houses but which is totally absent from the American imagination. In the Iraq depicted in this novel, there are still bombs, secret police and Saddam Hussein, but they are limited to the periphery of the story. The country is highlighted as the “cradle of civilization” through the exploration of the richness of its culture and history. The whole novel, indeed, conveys the idea of the cultural wealth and legacy of Iraq, and the Arab world in general.

Abu-Jaber reveals this intention of hers in the very opening of the novel when she writes: “Nothing is as black and as ancient as the night in Baghdad. It is dark and fragrant as the hanging gardens of the extinct city of Chaldea, as dark and still as the night in the uppermost chamber of the spiraling Tower of Babel” (3). The writer insists on the ancient civilizations in Iraq, Mesopotamia or the land between the rivers, the world’s oldest civilization where mankind invented the first writing system in history. Some of the hallmarks of the ancient civilization of that part of the world, apart from writing, are agriculture, urbanization and laws. In this context, “Legal theory flourished and was sophisticated early on, being expressed in several collections of legal decisions, the so-called codes, of which the best known is the code of Hammurabi” (Kuiper, 22). Hammurabi (1810 BC – 1750 BC) was the king of Babylonia who promulgated one of the first written laws in the world. The code was inscribed in a stele and placed in a public place where everybody could see it.

I would like here to open a personal parenthesis related to Hammurabi’s code, in particular, which has an emotional importance for me as it takes me back to my childhood when my father provided me with a number of books for kids to read. Some of them revolved around Hammurabi’s code through the different stories of the inhabitants of Babylon who found justice thanks to these laws. Later, during a visit to the Louvre Museum in Paris as an adult, I came across the Stele of Hammurabi by chance, not knowing that it was there. I still remember that moment when I first saw it, and I could not believe my eyes to find in front of me the original code about which I had read so much as a child. In this sense, *Crescent* (2003) has succeeded in returning to me some of my happy childhood memories related to my first contact with the ancient civilization of a country called Iraq.

From another perspective, I believe in the vital importance of highlighting Iraq's historical heritage especially nowadays due to the destruction we have witnessed, in the last few months, of some of the country's most important archeological treasures at the hands of the fanatic members of the auto-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, ISIL. The world has watched in horror the destruction of priceless three thousand-year-old artifacts in Iraq's second oldest museum in Mosul by sledgehammers and power drills, and later the demolition by bulldozers and explosives of some excavated remains of Nimrud, an Assyrian city dating back to the thirteenth century before Christ. In fact, it is humanity's heritage as a whole which is at risk.

Han continues describing his homeland, emphasizing its cultural richness: "Iraq is endless... There's the Euphrates River going one way, the Tigris in another. In Baghdad the Tigris is like a reflecting mirror under all the tall buildings. The gold and turquoise mosques with their big courtyards, all the libraries and museums, the great wooden doors and massive gates" (62-63). Baghdad is engraved in the memory of Han who tries to transport Sirine into a kind of virtual visit to see every garden, every street and every building. Overwhelmed by nostalgia, he traces a map of Iraq with his finger on Sirine's hands and arms introducing her to her father's homeland and providing her with details about the daily life of the city:

This is Baghdad here. And here is Tahrir Square... At the foot of the Jumhurriya Bridge. The center of everything. All the main streets run out from this spot. In this direction and that direction, there are wide busy sidewalks and the apartments piled up on top of shops, men in business suits, women with strollers, street vendor selling kabobs, eggs, fruit drinks. There's the man with his cart who sold me rolls sprinkled with thyme and sesame every morning and then saluted me like a soldier. And there's this one street... It just goes and goes, all the way from Baghdad to Paris. (66)

In this way, Abu-Jaber takes the reader to the busy streets of Baghdad in order to offer insights into the city's everyday life with its ordinary people going to work or shopping, and women with baby strollers. She tries to provide an air of ordinariness and normality to her portrayal of Iraq which is obviously very different from the images diffused in American media. Hence, she is giving human faces to the people of Iraq and the Arab world in general.

In her attempts to modify the stereotypical images of Arabs in the United States, Abu-Jaber uses her characters' closeness to the academic circle of the nearby university in order to shed light on Arab literature and arts. A nation's literature is the expression of its people. It is an art which entertains and instructs. In this sense, "The literature of the world is the foot-prints of human progress... It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy" (Dewart, ix). Hence, Abu-Jaber intends to highlight another aspect which is generally ignored in American mainstream media, which is the extensive variety of literature in Arabic. The novel's literary references are not restricted to any particular Arab country.

The writer's choice to start with poetry can be considered as her own way to celebrate the long Arab poetic tradition. Therefore, she takes the reader to a poetry reading by a certain Syrian poet called Aziz Abdo. Switching between Arabic and English, "His poems conjure up the image of an old man sweeping the streets in Baghdad, Jerusalem and Damascus. Sirine sees trees filled with birdcages, sparkling with colored songbirds. She sees sinewy sands, palm trees bending in the sky. These sound like places she might like to visit" (Abu-Jaber 2003: 17). As Han has anticipated in his introduction of the poet, Aziz manages to carry the audience "unconscious, through language, into our purest dream" (16). He "closes with a line that he says comes

from a famous poet whom he refers to as his spiritual mentor: ‘Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground’” (16). This line, which belongs actually to the Sufi Persian philosopher Rumi, has added an air of mysticism and beauty to the reading, blurring the lines between Middle-Eastern cultures, and consequently, between their corresponding communities in the United States.

In another episode of the novel, Abu-Jaber transports the reader to one of Han’s classes at the university on contemporary Arab writers that Sirine has attended once. When she gets into the classroom she sees the names of Ahdaf Soueif,<sup>47</sup> Emile Habiby<sup>48</sup> and Naguib Mahfouz are written on the blackboard. The class revolves around the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988. Han reminds the students of “an old expression in the Arab world that ‘Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads’” (87) in order to stress the importance of literature on the one hand, and the complicity and complementarity of Arab capitals in the literary field, on the other. He considers that Mahfouz is the inheritor of “ancient Arab traditions of arts and poetry” (87), comparing him with the writers of the Abbaside period.<sup>49</sup> He concludes that “Mahfouz exemplifies the Abbaside Arab ‘Renaissance man,’ if you will– both politically and artistically sophisticated and socially aware” (87).

Thus, Abu-Jaber makes use of Arab literary and cultural references throughout her novel in a way that passionately evokes the Arab homeland. She celebrates the richness of Arab culture portraying that part of the world as the site of a long literary tradition continuing to the present. In this way, mentioning Naguib Mahfouz, for

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<sup>47</sup> Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian writer who was born in 1950. She writes mostly in English. Her second novel *The Map of Love* (1999) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in the United Kingdom.

<sup>48</sup> Emile Habiby (1922-1996) was a Palestinian and an Arab Israeli writer of Arabic expression. His first novel *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* (1972) is a classic of Arab literature.

<sup>49</sup> The Abbaside Caliphate ruled the Islamic world from 750 to 1258 AD and founded their capital Baghdad in 762. It is commonly referred to as the golden age of the Islamic civilization. Under the rule of the fifth caliph of the dynasty Harun Al-Rashid (786-809), Baghdad became the world’s most important center for science, philosophy, medicine and education, as he supported artists, scholars and scientists.

instance, is part of this strategy, showing that the Arab world also has its own Nobel Prize laureate in literature. Moreover, the writer makes reference to Baghdad's literary clubs, along with poetic verses scattered throughout the novel by poets such as Adonis, Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati and Mahmoud Darwish. The novel even portrays American characters who are interested in the Arab world and its culture. Hence, Nathan, the photographer, describes his experience in Iraq:

I went to the Middle-East without any idea of who I was – there was no needle on my compass, you know? But the people in Iraq – this sounds dumb and romantic – but the thing is they really seemed to know who they were. They dressed the way their grandparents dressed, they ate the way they've eaten for hundreds of years. And they were so alive – I mean, lots of them didn't have TV or telephones, but everyone talked about politics, art, religion, you name it. They were living under a dictatorship but their inner selves stayed *alive* – do you see? (77)

Here again, Abu-Jaber stresses the cultural heritage of Iraq, portraying it as the home of a deep-rooted people issuing from ancient civilizations, in contrast with countries like the United States, in this case. She pays tribute to Iraqis presenting them as cultivated and educated people who appreciate culture. Even dictatorship did not manage to kill their spirit as it did not prevent them from engaging in cultural activities.

In addition to literature, it is important to mention the presence of Arabic music in the novel. For instance, Lon Hyden, the chairman of the Near Eastern Studies Department at the university, organizes a party in his house where people from different backgrounds are invited. In this party, "Middle Eastern violins and flutes swirl and swoosh through the air" (31). One of the guests declares that this is "*Simon Shaheen plays Mohammed Abdul Wahab* – I know Lon's favorites" (31). Shaheen is a Palestinian American oud player and composer, and in this record he pays a tribute to the famous Egyptian singer and composer Mohammed Abdul Wahab (1902-1991). Abu-Jaber here uses Arab songs as background music for an American party, and



shows that both American and non-American people can enjoy this music: “Sirine sees Um-Nadia grab the Russian Studies professor, Zinovy Basilevich, and starts propelling him around the pool in a shimmying, complicated dance. The big ginger-mustached professor looks frightened and happy” (31).

In addition, *Crescent* (2003) brings the angelic voice of the Lebanese Diva Fairuz, who is, by the way, one of my favorite singers. Fairuz’s voice creates a musical framework for the first date between the lovers in Han’s apartment. Sirine, who does not know the singer, is impressed by her voice: “How lovely... What a lovely voice she has” (60). This iconic chanteuse has been part of Lebanon’s cultural fabric for years. She is also referred to as the “Morning’s Diva”<sup>50</sup> because she has entered the everyday lives of people not only in Lebanon but across the Arab world, when every morning her celestial voice visits every Arab house for at least half an hour as if it is a morning prayer. Many generations of Arabs, including myself, have been starting their day with Fairuz, whose morning songs have come to represent a fresh new day.

I remember when I used to switch on the radio early in the morning while I was still in bed because I did not want to miss Fairuz’s playlist of the day. I usually remained in bed, sometimes dozing off, which resulted in the sweet feeling of having her songs in my morning dreams. When I moved to Madrid about thirteen years ago, the first music CD that I bought, curiously, was one by Fairuz. Moreover, her songs provided the background music for the many Tunisian dinners – with couscous as a main course – that I used to prepare for my Spanish and international friends. For all of these reasons, it has been so agreeable to find Fairuz in this novel, and bring to the surface many pleasant memories of my life both in Tunisia and Spain.

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<sup>50</sup> In arabic: سيدة الصباح sayidatu assabah.

For all of these reasons, Fairuz is much more than a singer, as she has become the symbol of Lebanon who brings all the Lebanese people together no matter what religious or ethnic group they belong to. In this way, during the fifteen years of the Lebanese civil war, from 1975 to 1990, she never took sides and remained in Lebanon, which somehow contributed to the alleviation of the Lebanese people's suffering with many of her songs about home and exile as well as hope that would bring back the desired peace to lovely Lebanon. Hence, she symbolizes the courage and determination of the Lebanese people whose lives were dominated by this war.

To get back to the novel, Han tells Sirine about the song that Fairuz's vibrant voice is chanting: "This song is called 'Andaloussiya.' It was a place where the Muslims and Jews lived together and devised miraculous works of philosophy and architecture. All the sorts of things that people get up to when you leave them in the sun together" (60). Therefore, while embellishing her novel with the beautiful presence of Fairuz's songs, Abu-Jaber makes reference to Al-Andalus's legacy of coexistence between the three religions during the Arab rule of parts of the Iberian Peninsula from 711 to 1492. Despite the attempts to overtly romanticize or, on the contrary, to question its legacy, Al Andalus remains a shining period of Arab civilization and an important phase of Islamic history. It was a place of interchange and a meeting point of cultures, races and religions, in which a tradition of tolerance and coexistence created a radiant society in the Middle Ages. Thus, in her efforts to discredit the common misrepresentations of Arabs and their culture in the United States, Abu-Jaber makes use of many examples of Arab history in order to introduce new perspectives for mainstream American readers to approach this part of the world. She uses the past so as to correct the mistakes of the present. In this respect, Edward Said argues that "Every writer is, of course, a reader of her or his predecessors as well, but what I want to

underline is that often surprising dynamics of human history... dramatize the latencies in a prior figure or form that suddenly illuminate the present” (2003: 25)

#### **4.2 Nadia’s Café: The re-creation of home in the ethnic borderland**

This Arab restaurant is portrayed as a space which has created its own micro culture and has become the symbol of a recreated home to which Arab students, teachers, exiles and immigrants flock. Thus, Abu-Jaber draws attention, by setting her novel around a café, to the fact that “cafés create their own cultural environment, their own micro cultures” (Shalal-Esa 2002: 5). In this light, Svetlana Boym states that “to feel at home is to know that things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that does not depend on actual location. The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world” (251). Therefore, the notion of home is more than a geographical place because it is actually related to familiarity, closeness and intimacy with the elements that contribute to the making of a home. In other words, home is where a person feels familiar with the surroundings. In this way, Nadia’s Café provides its customers with the familiarity and intimacy of their lost homelands that they are missing in the United States.

According to the yellowing newspaper reviews hung on the Café’s wall, it is “Aladdin’s hidden treasure!” or “The Middle East in Westwood” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 48). It is, as well, a place where Arab students and immigrants come to enjoy “Real True Arab Food” (9). In this context, “there is even a framed and signed glossy photograph of Casey Kasem, who once stopped by the café to eat and proclaimed that they made the best mjeddrah in town” (48). Likewise, Abu-Jaber portrays the restaurant as a place which has received praise for the food served there from prominent Arab American

personalities such as the famous Lebanese American radio star Casey Kasem,<sup>51</sup> for instance. Similarly, the Café is a special place welcoming Arab Americans as well as Arab immigrants and students where they can find an atmosphere which reminds them of their homelands:

At Nadia's Café, there is a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently tuned to the all-Arabic station, with news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles. There is a group of regulars who each have their favorite shows and dishes and who sit at the same tables as consistently as if they were assigned. . . . There are students who come religiously, appearing at the counter with their newspapers almost every day for years, until the day they graduate and disappear, never to be seen again. And then there are students who never graduate. (10)

Nadia's Café echoes Homi Bhabha's notion of "gathering" spaces where immigrants and exiles come together in a host country, and that he has experienced himself. He writes that he has "lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. He adds:

Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of "foreign" cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos of cafés of city centers; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. (291)

So, for the clientele, Nadia's Café serves as a site for gathering and a reconstruction of the longed-for old home in the new country.

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<sup>51</sup> Casey Kasem (1932-2014) was a famous disc jockey and radio personality born in Detroit, Michigan, to Lebanese Druze parents. He co-created and hosted "American Top 40" in 1970, which counted down the forty most popular songs in the United States. The syndicated show quickly became the countdown of thousands of radio stations around the world.

Many of these regulars point out the difficulty of making American friends, which converts the café into a homelike haven connecting them with people from their own culture and living in the same conditions as them:

Occasionally, a student would linger at the counter talking to Sirine. He would tell her how painful it is to be an immigrant – even if it was what he'd wanted all his life. Americans, he would tell her, don't have the time or the space in their lives for the sort of friendship – days of coffee-drinking and talking – that the Arab students craved. (Abu-Jaber 2003: 9-10)

The student's feelings about America and his homeland echo the double meaning of homesickness presented by Susan Friedman. She rightly notes that "homesickness too is a cryptogram; the word opens up into opposites: sick for home and sick of home" (191). In this context, immigrants end up longing for home and feeling nostalgic after all the efforts they have made to leave it. Moreover, the student here refers to the role of coffeehouses in the Middle East as an important social gathering place for men where they can spend long hours drinking coffee or tea, playing chess or other board games, and listening to music, among other social activities. He regrets that American people do not actually have time for this kind of activity in the cafés. As a matter of fact, "For many of them [Um-Nadia's] café was a little flavor of home" (Abu-Jaber 2003: 10).

The Café can be considered one of what Pierre Nora calls "lieux de mémoire" or sites of memory, which, according to him, are useful in the evocation of the past because "there is no spontaneous memory" (12) and they are permeated by a "symbolic aura" (19). Nora explains that,

Lieux de mémoire are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional. Even an apparently purely material site, like an archive, becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura. A purely

functional site, like a classroom manual, a testament, or a veterans' reunion belongs to the category only inasmuch as it is also the object of a ritual. (18-19)

Going to the Café is in itself a ritual that the customers deliberately and regularly practice, investing, in this way, their time and money with the intention of keeping in touch with their homelands, the memories of which are materialized through the food, the TV shows, the news, the conversations and the people, among other things. Therefore, the Café is a small re-creation of the Arab home in Los Angeles which revives the customers' memories and alleviates their estrangement and loneliness.

These students, exiles and immigrants who regularly visit the Café feel lonely, not only because they have left their countries of origin but also because they are trying to settle down in a country where Arabs are not welcomed. While they have difficulties being accepted in their adopted home and making American friends, they are aware of the negative perception of their people and countries in America. Consequently, the Café becomes a homelike sanctuary where they can find a familiar environment and people who understand them and listen to their stories. In addition, gatherings in the Café allow its immigrant regulars to get updated with the current events in the Middle East through the Arabic TV channels that they watch there as well as the discussions they engage in. This intimate atmosphere provides them with the opportunity to express in their own language their frustrations and worries about the instability in the Middle East and the wars continually breaking out there, and their consequences on their own conditions as Arabs in America.

While most of the clients are not happy with American foreign policy and its role in the political turmoil in the region, they cannot prevent themselves from longing for the opportunities and freedom that America offers them, after all. For this reason,

they perceive the Café's chef Sirine as the bridge between their lost homelands and their new adopted home:

They love her food – the flavors that remind them of their homes – but they also love to watch Sirine with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, her sea-green eyes... She is so kind and gentle-voiced and her food is so good that the students cannot help themselves – they sit at the tables, leaning toward her. (7)

The Iraqi American Sirine with her American looks and her Middle Eastern cooking alleviates the alienation of the Café regulars while she introduces them to American culture. In this respect, the Syrian poet Aziz asserts that her “cooking reveals America to us non-Americans. And vice versa” (187). Therefore, while Sirine reminds them of their Arab origins and enhances their ties with their culture, she reminds them as well of the America they yearn to enjoy and seize the opportunity to experience.

Apart from the regulars with an Arab background, Um-Nadia's Café is also frequented by people with different ethnic affiliations, converting it into an important gathering place. The mere location of this Lebanese restaurant makes of it the site of inter-ethnic interactions in the novel. Abu-Jaber explains that when she was a guest lecturer at UCLA, back in 1995, and she started thinking about writing *Crescent* (2003), “there really is this little Lebanese café in the heart of the section of town they called the Tarantula. I remember thinking – how interesting, it's Lebanese but it's an Iranian part of town” (Shalal-Esa 2002: 5). Therefore, the writer, inspired by an actual Lebanese restaurant in the middle of a Persian neighborhood, decides to further complicate her novel's ethnic panorama through the figure of an Iraqi American chef.

For this reason, the novel narrates how many Iranian neighbors refuse to visit the restaurant to be served by Sirine because of her Iraqi background, which evokes the

tensions between Iraq and Iran and their eight-year war.<sup>52</sup> This fact implies that immigrants not only bring their homelands' cultural values to their new adopted home, but also their tensions and rivalries. However, Koorosh, the owner of one of the Iranian markets close to the Café “appeared on Sirine’s first day of work announcing that he was ready to forgive the Iraqis on behalf of the Iranians. He stood open-mouthed when he saw white-blond Sirine, then finally blurted out, “Well, look at what Iraq has managed to produce!” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 10).

As I have already mentioned, Um-Nadia’s Café has acquired a gathering power as it provides a meeting point where people from different ethnic backgrounds get together. In addition to Arab and Arab American people, this inter-ethnic space is frequented by white Americans and Latinos, as well:

There are Jenob, Garb, and Schmaal – Engineering students from Egypt; Shark, a math student from Kuwait; Lon Hayden, the chair of Near Eastern Studies; Morris who owns the newsstand; Raphael-from-New-Jersey; Jay, Ron, and Troy from the Kappa Something Something fraternity house; Odah, the Turkish butcher, and his many sons. There are two American policemen – one white and one black – who come to the café every day, order fava bean dip and lentils fried with rice and onions. (10)

In addition, there are still some other elements which contribute to the delineation of this ethnic mosaic: Víctor Hernández from Mexico and Cristobal from El Salvador, both of whom help Sirine in the kitchen. In this way, the café “serves as a worldly space despite its modest physical size” (Salaita 2011: 102).

The café is the site of constant border crossings between these people with varied religious and ethnic origins, which reminds one of Gloria Anzaldúa’s definition of the borderlands which “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different cultures occupy the same territory, where under,

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<sup>52</sup> The Iran-Iraq war took place from September 1980 to August 1988.



lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (19). In this same context, Susan Friedman refers to the borderland as an “indeterminate, potentially shifting and broad terrain across and through which intercultural traffic and transaction circulate” (135). Furthermore, “these intercultural encounters” take place when people from different backgrounds intermingle in a way that creates “some form of connection across difference” (135).

Therefore, the café, and consequently, the novel, become a space of encounter and a territory of cultural negotiations, mapping, on the one hand, the complexities of the ethnic components of American society, and on the other, situating Arab and Arab American communities within the multiethnic reality of the United States. It is relevant here, to highlight that, “within this matrix of these intersecting cultures, an intercultural encounter between the members of the same society might involve the meeting of multiple differences, even when a shared membership in one group tends to obscure or overwhelm those differences” (Friedman 1998: 135). For this reason, it is important that contemporary Arab American writers respond to rigid and limited readings of Arab and Arab American communities in mainstream America and shed light on the complex and heterogeneous presence of subjects with Arab backgrounds in this country, hence the importance of the ethnic borderland strategy to achieve this goal. Thus, Carol Fadda-Conrey draws attention to the fact that,

contemporary Arab American writers such as Abu-Jaber and others articulate stories about individual and group identities, locating strategies by which the ethnic borderland becomes a space of communication for different minority groups, a space that ultimately leads to the transformation of ethnic relations. . . Recognizing the differences among and within minority groups becomes an essential part of Abu-Jaber’s delineation of the ties that unite them within *Crescent’s* ethnic borderland. (2006: 194)

Through the intercultural intersections exposed in her novel, Abu-Jaber portrays the coexistence of minority groups together with Arab Americans, focusing on the variety of individual as well as communal experiences. In this way, this inclusive strategy challenges essentialist and rigid perceptions of communities of color, including the Arab American one, and at the same time paves the way for the configuration of diverse perspectives and experiences. Abu-Jaber depicts a wide range of Arab and Arab American characters. Sirine, for instance, the thirty-nine-year old Iraqi American woman, is the daughter of an Iraqi father and an American mother, both of whom died in an African country while they were working for the Red Cross. Therefore, she has lived from an early age with her Iraqi uncle in Los Angeles and she has not had any other place as home. Her uncle, a university teacher, came to America with his brother looking for new opportunities and experiences. Accordingly, his experience diverges from Hanif, his countryman, who has fled Iraq and Saddam Hussein's regime in order to save his own life. Sirine's uncle tells his niece that "the Iraq your father and I came from doesn't exist anymore. It's a new, scary place. When your old house doesn't exist anymore, that makes things sadder in general" (116-17). On the other hand, Hanif's exilic experience has marked his life as he still cannot overcome the deep sense of loss engendered by his forced departure from Iraq. In this sense, even though Hanif and the uncle share the same national origins, they do not necessarily share the same immigrant experience in the United States. Even their approach towards Iraq is not the same because, while the one perceives it as strange and the opposite of home, the other is longing to return there and regain the "part of my body [which] was torn away" (152) when he left.

In addition to these characters, there is also a group of the café's regulars who do not play any important role in the novel's plot and whose national affiliation is carefully

delineated by the writer. These are the students from Egypt, Yemen and Kuwait, for instance, who try to find a homelike place in the café. Abu-Jaber highlights the differences existing between Arab American characters like the ones who have not known any place apart from the United States, and others who feel involved in the affairs of the Arab homeland. In this context, there is the figure of Rana, the active veiled Saudi American student who, in a “Women in Islam” meeting, insists that “American Muslims must do everything they can to show support for their Iraqi brothers and sisters” (159) after the Gulf War. She is answered by another Arab American woman saying, “I don’t even know why you expect us to know about all these political things...We just want to be Americans like everyone else...My brothers and sisters are in Orange County where they belong” (160). Once again, Abu-Jaber is trying to dismantle essentialist perceptions of Arabs and Arab Americans in the United States through her focus on the variety of attitudes and the complexity of the allegiances among the members of these communities.

Along with her intention to show cultural interactions and to bridge connections between Arab and Arab American communities with other groups of color, Abu-Jaber follows the same pattern of deconstructing essentialist perceptions in order to illustrate the diversity of the Latino experience in the United States, as well. As I have mentioned before, there are two Latino characters who work in the café, helping Sirine in the kitchen. Víctor is a Mexican American young man who does not feel quite at home in America. He says, “I was born here and all, but sometimes I wish I could just go off to some place like Mexico” (276). He expresses the displacement he feels in America, being the son of Mexican immigrants, and his longing for his parents’ homeland. When he once hears Aziz, the Syrian poet, say that Americans think that all Arab people are terrorists; he replies that he does not share their opinion. Aziz adds: “If you and I were

out shopping at the mall do you think any of the white guys there could tell the difference between us? They'd think you were one of my terrorist buddies" (187). Therefore, Aziz minimizes the difference between Arabs and Latinos, shedding light on the issue of racism in the United States which pervades many aspects of life there. He states that both Arab and Latino people are the object of racism in the United States, explaining that many white Americans do not make distinctions between people of color, and discriminate equally against both. Hence, Aziz is trying to find affinities and commonalities between Arabs and Latinos through the construction of a common ground based on the wholesale prejudices and racism that both groups are suffering from in America.

In her portrayal of affinities between Latinos and Arabs living in the United States, Abu-Jaber mentions as well the story of Cristobal, the refugee who escaped from El Salvador. It is Víctor who makes the connection between Hanif's escape from Iraq and Cristobal's experience. He tells Sirine that

[Han] was telling me what it was like where he comes from, about the *guardia* they have there, and their crazy dictator, and it was reminding me of something. And then I remembered it was Cristobal. You know Cristobal is from El Salvador? ... They firebombed his whole family. The *Guardia*. All dead. They were just little farmers from nowhere. Out in the country. You should see how messed up his legs are. (277)

So, despite their different national and cultural backgrounds, Cristobal and Han share some common experiences related to the persecution they have suffered in their countries of origin and which has marked their life in the United States. This is why, when Han suddenly returns to Iraq, Sirine wants to ask Cristobal what might happen to her lover there. She imagines that due to their shared experience, "Cristobal must somehow know the answer to that" (295). Although she realizes that the two men come from totally different countries, and that Cristobal cannot possibly foresee Han's fate

back in Iraq, she still feels that the Latino man must have some idea, some instinctive feeling, about the matter.

Once more, Abu-Jaber highlights here the solidarity which marks the exchanges between Latino and Arab characters in this novel, focusing, in this way, on the importance of constructing bridges between these communities. In this respect, the novel's interethnic encounters are culminated by the union between Víctor and Um-Nadia's daughter Mireille. One day, Sirine

walks into the basement storage room and discovers Víctor Hernández kissing Mireille on the butcher block table among the onion skins... A month later, Mireille is engaged to Víctor Hernández and Victor moves in with her and Um-Nadia. He makes three different kinds of mole sauces for their wedding dinner, and chocolate and cinnamon and black pepper sweetcake. (330-31)

For their wedding, the couple has chosen to mingle Mexican and Arab recipes, making of their union, in this way, the symbol of blending Middle Eastern and Latino traditions and identities. Therefore, Abu-Jaber suggests the possibility of bridging differences and creating common grounds for cross-cultural encounters, which helps overthrow stereotypes and create solidarity between different groups. In this way, the creation of new stages for the communication between different ethnic groups makes of hybridity a common concept bringing together all of these coexisting communities.

#### **4.3 Eating Up Differences and Cooking Up Stories**

Food is definitely one of the prominent themes treated in *Crescent* (2003) as it dominates the narrative's structure. This highlights Abu-Jaber's particular interest in food giving it a central position in her works, like her culinary memoir *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and her last novel *Birds of Paradise* (2011). In an interview with the

novelist Randa Jarrar, she states that she “never intended food to occupy so much of my creative work... But the obsession with food filled my childhood... In America, my Jordanian father spent decades cooking professionally and pursuing his dream of a restaurant, and it was one of the central ways that he explained himself to his American children.”<sup>53</sup> Abu-Jaber considers food “such a great human connector,” focusing on the intimacy it involves (Shalal-Esa 2002: 5). She comments that, while preparing her novel, she wanted to write about Arabic food and she “thought... Let the food be a metaphor for their experience. And I want people to relate it through the beauty and the passion of the senses, the sensory joy of the novel and the beauty of Arabic food” (5). Therefore, the writer is aware of the wide range of possibilities that food can offer for the narrative, perceiving it as “the most powerful way of creating the metaphor of the heart and gathering place, a place where the collective forms” (5). Accordingly, Abu-Jaber carefully uses food and the preparation of food as metaphors for her characters’ experiences, exploring themes like identity, community, bridging differences, and love, obviously.

Eating is a basic human activity which is part of everyday practice, necessary for satisfying the body’s fundamental and vital needs, allowing its survival. The significance of the act of eating surpasses restricted physiological needs to create a wider connection with social function. In this way, eating becomes a ritual full of meanings. In this context, Carol Bardenstein analyses the social importance of food stating that,

a resurgence of scholarship on the relationship between food and the many aspects of human experience has taken up with renewed interest these roles of food in the social, religious, and cultural lives of people and the ways food consumption, preparation, and transmission of

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<sup>53</sup> Jarrar, Randa. “Diana Abu-Jaber: Race, Food, and Cultivating Selective Deafness.” *Guernica: a Magazine of Arts and Politics*. (June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011)  
< [https://www.guernicamag.com/daily/diana\\_abu-jaber\\_race\\_food\\_and/](https://www.guernicamag.com/daily/diana_abu-jaber_race_food_and/) >

knowledge about food has figured in how individuals conceive of themselves, affiliate and identify with home, homeland, and a range of social groupings, and how the earliest and most persistently retained sense memories are profoundly incorporated into the creation and structuring of collective memory and cultural identity. (356)

Here, Brandenstein sheds light on the growing body of academic research on the theme of food due to its relevance in the analysis of many issues related to human behavior. It plays an essential role in the discussion of themes linked to culture and ethnic identity, among many others. In this sense, eating practices are, in reality, fundamental to self-identity and to the definition of community and home.

Brandenstein stresses, as well, the relation between food and memory when she points out that “both individual and collective memory are profoundly and densely embedded in, enacted, and communicated symbolically through the many forms of engagement with food” (355). This idea perfectly echoes the experience of the novel’s chef, whose engagement with food starts at a very early age when she used to watch her Iraqi father and her American mother preparing food. “Even though her mother was American, her father always said his wife thought about food like an Arab” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 39-40). Therefore, Sirine’s childhood memories take her back to her parents’ kitchen, which is the scene of her mother’s involvement with her husband’s Middle Eastern background through the production of food. Related to this,

Sirine’s earliest memory was of sitting on a phone book on a kitchen chair, the sour-tar smell of pickled grape leaves in the air. Her mother spread the leaves flat on the table like floating hands, placed the spoonful of rice and meat at the center of each one, and Sirine with her tiny fingers rolled the leaves up tighter and neater than anyone else could – tender, garlicky, meaty packages that burst in the mouth. (40)

Later, Sirine’s relationship with the kitchen starts in earnest as early as the age of nine when she learns about her parents’ death in Africa. That same day, she “went into

the kitchen and made an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself. Then she and her uncle ate them all week, sitting at the kitchen table. Sirine sat on a telephone book propped on her chair, legs swinging, eating and watching the back door” (40). And thus, Sirine becomes aware of the legacy that she has received from her parents, which leads her to take over the kitchen the very day she learns about their death. In fact, the choice of grape leaves to baptize her entry into the kitchen world is highly significant because “Cooked grape leaves provide the very soul of Middle Eastern food in the form of dolmas that are stuffed with rice, olive oil, garlic, lemon, onions, herbs, and ground lamb” (Mehta, 213). From now on, the kitchen has become her retreat where she can recall all her happy childhood memories when she was with her parents. It is the place where she has observed her parents’ complicity while preparing food together: “This was one of the ways that Sirine learned how her parents loved each other – their concerted movements like a dance; they swam together through the round arcs of her mother’s arms and her father’s tender strokes” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 49). They even invite their daughter to take part in the baklava-making ritual, for instance, to her great joy and excitement: “Sirine was proud when they let her paint a layer, prouder when she was able to pick up one of the translucent sheets and transport it to the tray – light as raw silk, fragile as a veil” (49). Therefore, cooking for her has always been related to her parents’ memory; and the kitchen is the place to be because of all the feelings it stirs in her and the memories it brings back.

As a result, Sirine chooses the kitchen to be the place where she works for a living, thinking that “work is home” (108). She has worked in different restaurants, such as French, Italian and American ones, until the day Um-Nadia looks for her and invites her to work in her new restaurant. That move is very important as it foreshadows a significant change in her life. In fact, “when she moved to Nadia’s Café, she went



through her parents' old recipes and began cooking the favorite – but almost forgotten – dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories" (9). Therefore, this new job has allowed Sirine to reconnect with her parents' memory and also to get back to her Arab heritage, from which she has been detached all these years.

Sirine is portrayed as a second generation Arab American woman who does not speak Arabic and who has little knowledge about the Arab world. She has inherited her mother's white American features, which allows her to pass as a real American, as understood in mainstream culture. Looking at herself in the mirror,

All she can see is white. She is so white. Her eyes wide, almond shaped, and sea-green, her nose and lips tidy and compact. Entirely her mother. That's all anyone can see: when people ask her nationality they react with astonishment when she says she's half Arab. I never would have thought *that*, they say, laughing. You sure don't look it. When people say this she feels like her skin is being peeled away. She thinks that she may have somehow inherited her mother on the outside and her father on the inside. If she could compare her own and her father's internal organs – the blood and bones and the shape of her mind and emotions – she thinks she would find her truer and deeper nature. She imagines her parents, young expecting their first child, expecting perhaps, a true amalgam of their two bodies. Were they disappointed, she wonders, to have an entirely fair-skinned child? (195-96)

Abu-Jaber points out that relying on skin color to identify a subject's race or ethnicity can lead to erroneous assumptions. Here, she compares Sirine's whiteness with the supposed darkness commonly associated with Arab features. In this sense, although color and physical appearance are considered significant racial and ethnic markers, they do not necessarily reflect a subject's identity or national affiliation.

In my opinion, the writer here is alluding to her own experience as a fair-skinned Jordanian American who does not fit in the mainstream perception of Arabs. She remarks: "I'm frequently told — sometimes insistently — that I don't look Arab. I'm

told that I look Russian or French or Irish or Greek or Italian. I don't take it too personally, though I sometimes have the sense that people simply don't want me to look Arab."<sup>54</sup> In the same way, just like Abu-Jaber, Sirine's hybridity provokes astonishment and sometimes even shock among Americans due to its contradiction with mainstream racial perceptions.

The fact of living with her uncle since her parents' death has not prevented Sirine from having a full American way of life totally disconnected from her Arab background. In this way, joining Nadia's Café gives her the opportunity to find a part of herself that she lost with her parents' death. While exploring this forgotten component of her identity, the food that she elaborates plays a fundamental role in the re-creation of home taking place at the café. The café's kitchen allows her to bring her Iraqi father's legacy back up to the surface, and at the same time, it contributes to keeping alive the Middle Eastern customers' connection with the traditions and the homeland they have left behind. Sirine thinks that "food should taste like it came from. I mean good food especially. You can sort of trace it back... Things show their origins" (59). Thus, she is aware of the necessity of being authentic while preparing Arab food, which creates a kind of intimate connection between her and Arab cuisine.

Speaking of this, Víctor Hernández argues that "Chef isn't an American cook... Not like the way Americans do food – just dumping salt into the pot. All the flavors go in the same direction. Chef cooks like we do. In Mexico, we put cinnamon in with the chocolate and pepper in the sweetcakes, so things pull apart, you know, make it bigger?" (187). Thus, in spite of being American, Sirine gets rid of her Americanness while cooking and becomes an Arab. In this way, like her mother before her, she "thought about food like an Arab" (39-40). In addition, Víctor points out the affinities

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<sup>54</sup> Abu-Jaber, Diana. "Seeing Ourselves." *The Washington Post*. October 21, 2001.  
<<https://commonplacelr.wordpress.com/category/diana-abu-jaber/>>

between Arab and Latino cuisines, highlighting the intermixture of culinary cultures. For instance, one day, Victor “brings a bagful of chili peppers” to Sirine, who “uses slices of the soft inner hearts puréed into the baba ghannuj and marinades for the kabobs” (255). This intermingling of Mexican and Middle Eastern ingredients produces creative new tastes and flavors mirroring the intermixture of cultures taking place in this novel.

One of the most significant examples of the novel’s blending of flavors and cultures is the gathering that takes place in the house of Sirine’s uncle, baptized “Arabic Thanksgiving” by the chef. The feast has gathered together many of the novel’s diasporic characters: “By noon, there is Han, Mireille, Víctor Hernández, and his cousin Eliazar, Aziz the poet, Nathan, Um-Nadia, Cristobal the custodian, Shark, Jenob, Abdullah, Schmaal, and Gharb – five of the lonely students from the café – Sirine, and her uncle” (182). Therefore, Sirine and her uncle have opened the doors of their house for these people, giving them the opportunity to feel the sense of a community in this important American feast characterized by family reunions. In fact, “Sirine and her uncle try to invite over anyone who needs a place to sit and have a bite and a conversation” (174). As Nathalie Handal argues,

Food demonstrates the cultural traits and behaviors of a group, for instance, the hospitality (giving and sharing) of Arab culture is expressed through their continuous offering of food. Food is a gift of God, according to Islam, and should be shared. Through eating we create bonds and social solidarity by learning about others, by learning to understand and accept their differences as well as our own. (141)

The gathering in the house of Sirine’s uncle embraces this spirit described by Handal, as it has resulted in a multiethnic “family” celebration symbolizing the novel’s constant border crossing.

The composition of the guests foreshadows the hybrid menu prepared for the dinner. Sirine decides to prepare “rice and pine nuts and ground lamb in the turkey instead of cornbread, and yogurt sauce instead of cranberries” (Abu-Jaber 2003: 174), together with “sautéed greens with the bittersweet vinegar, and lentils with tomato, onion, and garlic” (181). She also prepares “stuffed squashes and grape leaves, the creamed spinach and glazed sweet potatoes, the smoked frekeh and the baba ghannuj” (186). In addition to all of this,

Among the guests’ contributions, there is a big round fatayar – a lamb pie – that Aziz bought from the green-eyed girl at the Iranian bakery; six sliced cylinders of cranberry sauce from Um-Nadia; whole roasted walnuts in chili sauce from Cristóbal; plus Víctor brought three homemade pumpkin pies and a half-gallon of whipping cream. (183)

The abundance of food variations present on this special Thanksgiving table reflects the richness of the culinary traditions brought to America by immigrants represented here by Middle Eastern as well as Latino traditions. The turkey, which traditionally dominates the table of the American Thanksgiving, has been hybridized here through the cinnamon ancestral flavor that Sirine adds to it. Accordingly, this “Arabic Thanksgiving,” characterized by the merging of different culinary aromas, illustrates the negotiation processes that ethnic groups go through in America, fusing the traditions of the homelands left behind with the newly acquired customs belonging to the host country, in order to bring about new flavors and new identities.

Sirine’s uncle addresses his guests and says:

Well, look at us... sitting around here like a bunch of Americans with our crazy turkey. All right, now, I want to make a big toast. Here’s to sweet, unusual families, pleasant dogs who behave, food of this nature, the seven types of smiles, the crescent moon, and a nice cup of tea with mint every day. Sahtain. Good luck and God bless us everyone. (183)

Aware of the complexity of the ethnic component of this special celebration taking place in his house, the uncle blesses the table and declares that their differences do not prevent them from forming part of the same family, which is the one gathering all the members of the ethnic fabric of the United States of America. More importantly, he validates his audience as being part of this nation; and despite their differences, they all contribute to the negotiation of the American self. The uncle also makes reference to the crescent moon which has appeared that night of Thanksgiving as if it were a Muslim sacred date like the holy month of Ramadan or Eid al-Fitr<sup>55</sup>. The Islamic calendar is based on lunar months which begin when a new crescent is sighted in the western sky after sunset within a day or so after the new moon. Even though most Muslim countries do not use this calendar on a daily basis, but only to mark important religious dates, the sighting of the crescent moon in the Muslims' mind is related to celebrations and happiness, and obviously family gatherings. Here, Abu-Jaber is equating this quintessential American holiday with Muslim celebrations, which conveys the coexistence of these hyphenated characters in America's social fabric.

This special Thanksgiving organized by Sirine reveals the process of culinary exploration of identity undergone by the chef thanks to her job, on the one hand, and to her lover, on the other:

In the past, Sirine would be absorbed for weeks thinking about what she would cook for Thanksgiving. It was her mother's favorite holiday and the traditional American foods always made Sirine think of her, the warmth of their table in the fall; it was among the earliest and the best of her memories. But things are different now. Her mind has been taken up by Han. (174)

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<sup>55</sup> Eid al-Fitr is one of Islam's most sacred holidays that celebrates the end of the holy month of fasting for Ramadan.

Therefore, Sirine's blending of her forgotten Arab legacy with her present is accelerated by the appearance of Han in her life. Her best guarded secret has been that "food was better than love: surer, truer, more satisfying and enriching. As long as she could lose herself in the rhythms of peeling an onion, she was complete and whole. And as long as she could cook, she will be loved" (184).

However, everything has changed the night she and Han meet at Lon Hayden's party when a crescent moon appears in the dark sky. "'Look there.' Han points to the sky. 'An Arab crescent.' She looks at the paper-fine moon. 'Why do you call it that?'" (35) Han replies: "'It reminds me of the moon from back home.' He looks at her. 'It's a good omen'" (35). Therefore, not only does the crescent signal the beginning of a new lunar month that night, but also celebrates the birth of a love story between Han and Sirine. At that very moment, Han receives the signal and becomes aware of the growing reciprocity between them. Despite the number of Arab men who go to the café, Han is the only one who succeeds in attracting Sirine's attention because, unlike the others, he "looks at her. Even though they barely know each other, she has the clear uncanny sense that when he looks, he sees her" (37).

Therefore, food becomes a means of communication between Sirine and Han. In one of his first visits to the café, Sirine makes knaffea<sup>56</sup> for breakfast that day. Um-Nadia asks her laughing: "Who are we in love with, I wonder?" (28). The latter's reaction implies that the elaboration of such a complicated and delicious Middle Eastern dessert reveals Sirine's intentions to please Han and show him her ability to make him feel at home. The chef takes a knaffea plate and heads to Han's table to serve him herself: "'Some knaffea, sir?' she says, and when Han looks at her the feeling of it stirs inside her like an ache in her neck and shoulders. She has an impulse to sit and feed him by

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<sup>56</sup> Knaffea, or knafeh, is a delicious Levantine sweet cheese pastry.

hand” (28-29). Realizing the impact of Han’s look on her, Sirine becomes aware of the extent of her growing feelings towards him to the extent that she would even feed him herself. Accordingly, food is a human connector that Sirine uses to transmit her feelings, implying her search for complicity and connection.

In this way, she goes back to her childhood kitchen when she observes her parents’ synchronicity and choreographed movements revealing a harmonious integration of the one with the other while preparing baklava together, and decides to put all of this into practice with Han. Baklava is usually served as a dessert at the café. One day, Sirine comes a bit late to work and realizes she has little time for the elaboration of baklava before breakfast. However, she is unable to skip it that day because she thinks that “baklava is important – it cheers the students up. They close their eyes when they bite into its crackling layers, all lightness and scent of orange blossoms” (49). Moreover, she feels disrupted because of the interruption of her sensorial routine of baklava making, as she “feels unsettled when she tries to begin breakfast without preparing the baklava first; she can’t find her place in things” (49).

Therefore, Sirine turns to Han, who passes by her kitchen to greet her, and who, in order to help her restore the order of her life that has been displaced that morning, offers to help her: “There’s time for baklava if they make it together” (49). They merge together in the harmonious ritual of baklava-making:

She hunts in the big drawer for another apron, shows him where to stand, how to pick up the sheets of filo dough from its edge, the careful precise unpeeling, the quick movement from the folded sheets to the tray, and finally the positioning on top of the tray. He watches everything closely, asks no questions, and then aligns the next pastry sheet perfectly. She paints the dough with clarified butter. And while Sirine has never known how to dance, always stiffening and trying to lead while her partner murmurs relax, relax – and while there are very few people who know how to cook and move with her in the kitchen – it seems that she and Han know how to make baklava together. She’s startled to find that she seems to feel his presence in her shoulders, running through her arms and

wrists, into her hands. Her senses feel bunched together like fingers around a bouquet, her skin sensitive to the touch. She feels light-headed. She watches the fluent movement in his legs, arms and neck, the dark fringe of his eyes. He transports the sheets and she sweeps the pastry brush, losing herself in the rocking movement. (49-50)

This long excerpt shows that, like her parents before her, this baklava-making experience has become Sirine's own synchronized act of love. Both of them are devotedly taking part in this harmonized exercise of sweets elaboration. They are sharing this delightful task, letting their feelings interact and merge together in order to give a sweet push to the relationship about to start between them. This experience makes Sirine realize her compatibility with Han who has proved to be a suitable partner in the kitchen and maybe in the outside.

This experience stirs Han's memories and takes him back to his mother's kitchen in Iraq "where women were always telling stories. My mother and my aunts and the neighbors and – my sister" (50). This reveals the strong connection between the preparation of baklava and memory. In this context, Brinda J. Mehta states that:

The very process of making baklava symbolizes the act of making memories through communal effort. The layering of nuts and paper-thin dough to create a refined culinary treat parallels the tenuous progression of memory, whose delicate texture provides a lifeline to the past. Like the folds of memory, baklava-making involves a fragile internal organization in which a combination of liquid and solid substances preserves the composition of each sweetened square. (214)

To illustrate Mehta's argument, the mere fact of reading the episode describing Sirine and Han sharing this exquisite experience of baklava making, has found its way to the folds of my own memory. It has taken me back to memories of communal preparation of baklava in my mother's as well as grandmother's kitchens. With every new layer of the pastry Han and Sirine lay out on the tray, a new memory surfaces in my mind.



Baklava makes me think about celebrations and family gatherings in religious feasts and weddings, among others, because it is the queen of all the desserts. Therefore, in my mind, baklava's very presence in any household is synonymous with happiness and celebration.

After sharing this exquisite experience of baklava-making with her, Han invites Sirine for dinner in his apartment. He prepares for her a traditional American meal of meat loaf after studying some old American cookbooks. For him, this shift from Middle Eastern to American food makes him feel "intrigued by the new kind of cooking, a shift of ingredients like a move from native tongue into a foreign language: butter instead of olive oil; potatoes instead of rice; beef instead of lamb" (Abu-Jaber 2003: 58). Abu-Jaber, here, is making an obvious demarcation of these two gastronomic traditions in order to highlight the culinary exchange performed by the two lovers. Han tries to integrate Sirine's American world into his own by means of food, which has become here a form of communication between them. Sirine praises "the rich texture of this meat loaf – the eggs and breadcrumbs – and these bits of onion are so good, and there's a little chili powder and dry mustard, isn't it? It's lovely" (58-59). In this way, this intercourse through food becomes a fundamental component of their relationship as lovers.

With the objective of pleasing him and soothing his painful exilic experience, Sirine "looked up Iraqi dishes, trying to find the childhood foods that she's heard Han speak of, the sfeeahas – savory pies stuffed with meet and spinach – and round mansaf trays piled with lamb and rice and yoghurt sauce" (181). The chef's quest for Iraqi recipes conveys her interest in developing her relationship with her lover, which highlights the role of food as a human connector and a bridge transcending limitations and differences. Therefore, for Sirine and Han, "food is their own private language"

(256). Sirine tries to make up for the loss of her father's Arabic language through her efforts to acquire and master the notions of the special language of Arab gastronomy, which has created a space for the lovers to share their stories and memories, and also to lessen the cultural alienation experienced by them. Hence, sharing food helps the couple transcend their differences, situating them in an in-between space where negotiation is a key factor dominating all the exchanges taking place between them.

Even after Han's abrupt return to Iraq, this secret language of food remains. After his departure, her "food doesn't taste the way it should, but she no longer cares about food" (303). Her indifference conveys the idea that food is a form of expression reflecting the cook's mood together with all the stories behind it. Sirine understands the effect of her food on her customers through the "bridesmaid present" that Mireille gives her the day of her wedding with Víctor. It is "a book about a woman who cried into her cooking and infected her guests with her emotions" (331). After reading the book, Sirine spends some weeks thinking about the possible effects she might be having over her customers through the ingredients of sadness and hopelessness that have been added to her dishes since Han's sudden return to Iraq. She becomes conscious that, as a consequence of losing her lover, "her customers – the young Arab students, professors and their families – seem more serious than before, more given to brooding, hugging, and thinking. And on several occasions someone – usually a student – has burst into tears while eating the soup or tearing the bread" (331).

It is important to signal Abu-Jaber's direct reference to *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies* (1992)<sup>57</sup> by the Mexican writer Laura Esquivel. The novel narrates the love life of Tita, the youngest daughter of a rural middle-class Mexican family, which takes

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<sup>57</sup> The book was written and published originally in the Spanish language under the title of *Como agua para chocolate: novela de entregas mensuales con recetas, amores, y remedios Caseros*, in 1989.

place in the kitchen. María Elena de Valdés points out Tita's ability "to survive her mother's harsh rule by transferring her love, joy, sadness, and anger into her cooking. Tita's emotions and passions are the impetus for expression and action, not through the normal means of communication but through the food she prepares. She is, therefore, able to consummate her love with Pedro through the food she serves" (80). Tita and Pedro are deeply in love, but they are not allowed to get married because the girl's mother, Mama Elena, thinks that her youngest daughter's duty is to stay home and take care of her mother until her death. Tita is heartbroken when she learns about Pedro's intention to marry her sister Rosaura. Tita weeps with sadness while preparing her sister's wedding cake, and her stream of tears spills into the batter. Therefore, Natcha the cook tries to comfort her saying: "Go to bed child, I'll finish the meringue icing. Only the pan knows how the boiling soup feels, but I know how you feel, so stop crying, you're getting the meringue watery, and it won't set properly" (Esquivel 1992: 35). Consequently, Tita's tears have transformed the cake into something enchanting, causing longing and heartsickness in the wedding guests:

The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing. Even Pedro, usually so proper, was having trouble holding back his tears. Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently... Everyone there, every last person fell under this spell, and not very many of them made it to the bathrooms in time – those who didn't join the collective vomiting that was going on all over the patio. Only one person escaped: the cake had no effect on Tita. (39)

In this scene of magical realism, Esquivel displays the power of Tita's tears which have provided her food with a mood-altering effect on the consumers.

Therefore, like Sirine, Tita as a cook has the power to induce feelings like sadness and heartsickness among the wedding guests. Sirine's mourning after Han's sudden disappearance does not lead her food to intoxicate her customers but rather

makes them sad and serious, enhancing their homesickness. More importantly, Abu-Jaber's reference to Esquivel's novel aims to blend Mexican and Middle Eastern culture, the culmination of which is symbolized by the wedding of Mireille and Víctor. The latter introduces the chef to Mexican literature and to this novel in particular, suggesting that both Sirine and Tita have similar experiences, which allows them to share their cooking, their love and their life with the guests and customers. In this way, Abu-Jaber sheds light on the power of food, as well as literature, in creating alliances and affinities between people from different backgrounds.

Now, I will explore another element closely connected to food in *Crescent* (2003), which is storytelling. Abu-Jaber starts most of the novel's chapters with a part of an ongoing fantastic tale told by Sirine's Iraqi uncle. In this way, the writer blends the novel's main plot about the love story between Sirine and Han, taking place in the nineties, with a parallel mythical tale. The uncle's stories are exchanged for his niece's delicious dishes. In this sense, the chef uses Arab food as a means to persuade her uncle to use his Scheherazade-like skills to tell her the mythical tale of the adventures of Abdelrahman Salahadin and his mother Aunt Camille. Hence, Sirine provides her uncle with the food he likes in order to listen to his tales:

Sirine's uncle leans forward over their kitchen table, watching Sirine as she scrapes a little more tabbouleh salad on to his dinner plate. "I'm so full, Habeebti," he says. "Really, I couldn't eat another bite."  
"You didn't eat any vegetables at all." She stands and places the dishes in the sink. When she turns back, however, he is biting into a large, walnut-stuffed ma'mul cookie. She puts her hands on her hips.  
"So," he says quickly, dusting crumbs away as if he could hide evidence. "Isn't it time for the next chapter of the moralless tale of Abdelrahman Salahadin?" (13)

Even the uncle is aware of this kind of deal as he claims his culinary reward for the stories he tells his niece. He says: "I would just like to point out at this moment, for the

record, that accomplished uncles and storytellers are usually rewarded with plates of knaffea pastry. For the record. Then we can get on with our story” (24).

Hence, it seems that Arab food is like an incentive which provokes the uncle’s recalling of the cultural legacy of his Arab homeland in order to create a fantastic tale full of vibrant details worthy of an episode from *The Thousand and One Nights*. The Arab American poet and writer Naomi Shihab-Nye confirms this duality when she describes the interconnectedness of Arab food and storytelling in her childhood home. She explains that

Our Palestinian father was a wonderful storyteller. Every night my brother and I drifted off to sleep wrapped in the mystery of distant neighbors, villages, ancient stone streets, donkeys, and olive trees. Our house by day was fragrant with cardamom spice and coffee, pine nuts sizzled in olive oil, and delicious cabbage rolls. My girlfriend brought iced cupcakes to girl scouts for treats, but I brought dates, apricots, and almonds. (vii)

Thus, mingling food with storytelling is actually the novel’s fundamental component. Besides her focus on Arab food, Abu-Jaber sheds light on the Middle Eastern oral narrative tradition through the novel’s framing story. In the tradition of *The Thousand and One Nights*, commonly referred to as *The Arabian Nights*, Abu-Jaber narrates the mythical tale of Abdelrahman who sells himself into slavery in order to earn money and then escapes from his masters faking his death by drowning in the sea. Although the novel’s real and mythical worlds seem unrelated, they sometimes converge and echo one another. By the end of the novel, at some points, the lines between the fantastic tale and the realistic one get blurred, when Sirine starts feeling very confused:

She thinks of the story of Abdelrahman Salahadin. Sometimes, in the months after Han left, when she was falling asleep she got confused and couldn’t quite remember if it was Han or Abdelrahman who loved her, if it was Han or Abdelrahman who dove into the black page of the open

sea. Was it Abdelrahman who had to leave her, to return to his old home, or Han who was compelled to drown himself, over and over again. (338)

Magali Cornier Michael draws our attention to “late twentieth century fiction’s experimentation with form, which includes the creative deployment of framed tales by white American male writers such as John Barth, Robert Coover, and Kurt Vonnegut, among others” (314). She points out the presence of the figure of a storyteller addressing a listener in many of these works. She argues that “*Crescent* certainly participates in this tendency within contemporary fiction to reincorporate elements from oral traditions into the novel form as a means of reinvigorating the novel form as socially relevant” (314). In the case of *Crescent* (2003), therefore, Abu-Jaber borrows the form of a traditional Middle Eastern cultural icon of oral storytelling and combines it with the form of the Western novel, giving birth to a hybrid fiction in harmony with this work’s central discourse of hybridity.

In this context, Steven Salaita comments that Abu-Jaber’s inclusion of a storytelling uncle in her novel “recalls Rabih Alameddine’s focus on the story as a profound element of Arab culture and history” (2011: 104). Alameddine’s novel *The Hakawati* (2008) also merges modern fictive techniques with the storytelling traditions influenced by *Arabian Nights*. Moving easily between the classic narrative traditions and modern Western fiction, the novel is an important contribution to the Arab American literary corpus. The novel’s title means “storyteller,” personalized in the figure of Jihad, the uncle of the protagonist Osama. On the one hand, Alameddine brings fantastic rich tales from different Middle Eastern cultures, and on the other, he portrays the life of an extended multiethnic Lebanese family whose members live in the United States and Lebanon. In this way, using the technique of a story within a story, the novel skillfully moves between the ancient wars and the modern Lebanese civil war.

Diana Abu-Jaber makes use of the same technique in the narration of Abdelrahman's survival skills and adventures. He has spent many years feigning having drowned to escape his enslavers until he was abducted by the mermaid Queen Alieph. When she stops receiving any news from her son, Aunt Camille starts looking for him. After forty years of searching everywhere, she returns home to Aqaba, Jordan, to discover that her son has become an actor in Hollywood under the name of "Omar Sharif." She has received a letter from the mermaid telling her about her lost son's fate, attaching "a few of her latest poems, which were going to be published in a literary magazine" (Abu-Jaber 2003: 315). In the meanwhile, Abdelrahman Salahadin, now called Omar Sharif, gets tired of his life in Hollywood and decides to go to Cairo to take part in "a play called *Othello*" (329) that an Egyptian director, a friend of his, has translated into Arabic. The play's advertizing posters are scattered all over Cairo, "and neither Abdelrahman, nor al-Rashid [the director] had any inkling that, having seen the publicity posters, two special women would be in the audience for the opening night: a mermaid poet and a proud mother" (330). Abdelrahman finally gets reunited with his mother.

Therefore, in these tales, everything is "true, not true, real, not real. Who knows what's what?" (264). In fact, the tale traces Aunt Camille's journeys throughout Syria, the heart of Africa, and Egypt in her search for her lost son, witnessing events occurring in epochs as separate as the thirteenth, the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. In this context, even Sir Richard Burton appears in the uncle's tale because it turns out that Abdelrahman's mother is the one who inspired him in his translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*. During her search for her son, the mother turns to Burton, becoming his slave, because he knows the way to the source of the Nile, where she thinks she can locate him. Thus, "in her slow and very nice and deliberate way, she began to take up

space in Burton's imagination... she began the metamorphosis from slave to muse" (99). In this way, she becomes "the one to show Burton who Shaharazad might have been" (111), as "she woke his imagination and lit his consciousness like a torch" (112).

Therefore, Abu-Jaber portrays Aunt Camille as a strong and fluent Arab woman who dares to do the impossible in order to fulfill her will. She becomes able to enchant Burton by her eloquence and intelligence, which leads him to help her reach the source of the Nile. In this way, the novel challenges the stereotypical common representations of Arab women in American media, providing a different portrayal of them. As Amal Abdelrazek argues, "Aunt Camille uses her narrative mastery to change Burton's and the whole Western world's distorted view of Middle Eastern women" (218). Abdelrahman's mother reminds us of another character in the realist plot, who is the café's owner Um-Nadia. She is portrayed as an industrious and wise woman who is successfully running her own business, and who is extremely respected by all the customers, both Arabs and non-Arabs. She is so brave that she accepts to buy the café from its previous Egyptian owner whose business has failed because of the daily presence of the two men in business suits belonging to the C.I.A. As soon as she opens the café, "the two men in sunglasses promptly reappeared at the counter, but Um-Nadia, who said she'd seen worse in Beirut, chased them off the premises flapping her kitchen towel at them" (Abu-Jaber 2003: 9). Thus, she does not give them the opportunity to intimidate her and to harm her customers, as well as her business.

Abu-Jaber's portrayal of these female characters reverses popular representations of Arab women in the United States. This depiction is in harmony with the novel's objective to display a more realistic image of Arab and Arab American characters, validating their membership of the American community as a whole. The novel responds to rigid and narrow depictions of Arabs and Arab Americans in



America, providing what Gregory Orfalea considers as “what the stereotyper wants to blur” (117). In this way, she reveals her determination to present the “images of humanness” (117) needed for the overturning of the stereotypical depiction of her community. The novel’s anti-essentialist discourse highlights the complexity and heterogeneity of the Arab presence in the United States. Therefore, Abu-Jaber creates a hybrid novel, merging Middle Eastern oral tradition with the form of the Western novel, emphasizing hybridity as the central discourse of her work. The novel itself is a Third Space where inter-ethnic bridging provides a site where traditions and identities are being negotiated in order to create new hybrid traditions and identities in-process, shaping, in this way, the cultural landscape of America today.



## **CHAPTER 5**



## CHAPTER 5

### *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND: THE COLLAPSE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM*

The aim of this chapter is to analyze Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), one of the first Arab American fictional works addressing the tragic events of September 11, 2001 and their subsequent effects on the lives of thousands of Arabs and Arab Americans in the United States. The novel responds to the post 9/11 political and social atmosphere in America, and challenges the narrow kinds of patriotism that have emerged in the aftermath, leading to the marginalization and the discriminatory profiling of people with Arab and Muslim backgrounds. In this light, Georgiana Banita uses the expression "moral racialization" to refer to this strategy of employing a specific rhetoric based on simplistic forms of patriotism in order to demonize the members of a racial group considered suspicious. She points to the racialized aspect of the "war on terror" discourse which identifies the enemy according to their appearance. She states that:

The division of the world into good and evil as proposed by the Bush administration in the days leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan and the start of the war on terror culminated in what may be called moral racialization, that is, the articulation of a racially suspicious enemy figure propagated through the visual media and intended to imbibe and redirect as much public resentment as possible. Moral racialization as I understand it here relies on the group dynamics of moral panic, supplemented with already entrenched patterns of racial intolerance. (245)

Hence, the perpetuation of stigmatized views and indiscriminate demonizing depictions of Arab and Muslim identities have led to the isolation of whole communities, converting them into the target for collective punishments.

In this way, the group that Joanna Kadi once called “The Most Invisible of the Invisibles” (xix)<sup>58</sup> has been increasingly acquiring much or even too much visibility within the dominant public discourses in the United States. It is true that, even prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks, Arabs and Arab Americans were already commonly positioned under an interrogative of suspicion in “moments of [national] crisis” (Majaj 1999: 321). In this sense, Nadine Naber draws attention to “decades of state-sponsored harassment of Arab American individuals, particularly those who are politically active” (4). According to her, the World Trade Center attacks are, in fact,

a turning point, as opposed to the starting point, of histories of Anti-Arab racism in the United States... September 11 was a turning point, in that representations of ‘terrorism’ and ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ have increasingly replaced other representations (i.e., the rich Arab oil sheikh and belly-dancing harem girls) and have become more fervently deployed in anti-Arab state policies and everyday patterns of engagement than ever before. (4)

As a clear example of this, anti-Arab forms of discrimination have taken a vertiginous ascending tendency, leading, for instance, to the increase of hate crimes against people considered Arab or Muslim.

Therefore, the general atmosphere that reigned after the attacks favored the consolidation of “the racialization of the category ‘Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim’ as a signifier of nonwhite Otherness or that a ‘racialization of Islam’ has underlain the post-9/11 backlash against persons perceived to be Arab, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and/or Muslim” (1-2). In this context, Mahmood Mamdani also observes the fundamental role played by official America in the creation of this atmosphere through its discourse based on making a distinction between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims.” As he says, “From this point of view, ‘bad Muslims’ were clearly

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<sup>58</sup> Kadi, Joanna. “Introduction.” *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*. Ed. Kadi. Boston: South End Press, 1994. Print.

responsible for terrorism... ‘good Muslims’ were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this terrible crime and would undoubtedly support ‘us’ in a war against ‘them’” (15). He comes to the conclusion that the main idea behind this official discourse is that “unless proved to be ‘good,’ every Muslim was presumed to be ‘bad’” (15). Based on this presumption, new legislation and security measures were put into effect in the aftermath of September 11, such as the Patriot Acts I and II, undermining Muslim and Arab Americans’ rights and security.

In spite of the fact that these Acts as well as other decrees were supposed to apply to all Americans, they actually single out Arab and Muslim Americans in particular. Most importantly, the consequent infringement of these communities’ civil rights found widespread popular support. For instance, “in the days immediately after the attacks, the majority of Americans, according to Gallup polls, were in favor of profiling Muslims” (Jamal 2008: 115).<sup>59</sup> Therefore, legitimizing the violation of the rights and liberties of Arab and Muslim American communities is the consequence of a fast racialization process targeting these groups, fueled by the “war on terror” discourse and the media frenzy. These communities become increasingly identified as the enemy.

In this way, a whole marginalization process was put in motion, raising doubts about the very citizenship of Arab and Muslim Americans, who were depicted as “not true members of the body politic, not quite part of the national community” (Joseph, D’Halingue and Wong, 230). Their very right to ‘belong’ to America came into question, under the pretext that a subject cannot be Arab and/or Muslim and at the same time American. Hence, this essentialization project portrays these communities “as culturally distinct from the ‘rest’ of America,” claiming that “the ‘culture’ of Arab

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<sup>59</sup>Jamal, Amaney. “Civil liberties and the Otherization of Arab and Muslim Americans.” *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*. Ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008. Print.

Americans and Muslim Americans is not only incongruent with ‘American’ culture, but also suspect” (233). Consequently, the members of these communities “are transformed into high-risk citizens, subtly justifying indiscriminate violation of the civil rights of, as well as possible violence against, a vibrant part of the body politic” (234-35).

Laila Halaby situates her novel in this context of the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, narrating a richly layered tale about the lives of the Haddads, a Jordanian-American couple who live in a comfortable middle-class setting in Tucson, Arizona, where Jassim is an accomplished hydrologist and his wife Salwa works in banking and real estate. Their marriage is on shaky ground, and their personal challenges are compounded by the prejudice, suspicion and hatred surrounding them after 9/11. Their seemingly bright prospects in the American Promised Land begin to dim as their conflicts with each other, and with the culture surrounding them start to tear their marriage apart.

Halaby reveals her engagement with the destabilization caused by the anti-Arab/Muslim discourse set in America in the post 9/11 landscape as early as the novel’s preface. She introduces her protagonists in the following way: “We really come to know them after the World Trade Center buildings have been flattened by planes flown by Arabs, by Muslims. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything” (Halaby 2007: vii-viii). After that, she creates a sort of virtual checkpoint where she addresses the readers and gives them a box where they are required to leave all their prejudices if they want to take part in the journey that her novel is about to start:

Before I tell this story, I ask that you open the box and place in it any notions and preconceptions, any stereotypes with regard to Arabs and Muslims that you can find in your shirtsleeves and pockets, tucked in your briefcase, forgotten in your cosmetic bag, tidied away behind your



ears, rolled up in your underwear, saved on your computer's hard drive. This box awaits terrorists, veils, oil, and camels. There's room for all of your billionaires, bombers, and belly-dancers. (viii)

Moreover, Halaby asks the reader to get rid of "those hateful names as well, ones you might never ever mutter: Sand Nigger, Rag Head, and Camel Jockey. You don't need them for this story" (ix). The writer sets her own conditions for the reader who she invites into the intimate space of her novel, considering it an imaginary storytelling home at the door of which shoes are left in order to keep the floor clean. She finally welcomes the reader who manages to surmount all the virtual checkpoint's obstacles: "Do you feel lighter now, relieved of your excess baggage? Trust me; it will make listening to the story easier, and you won't get dog shit all over my floors" (ix). With her clever use of this powerful metaphor, Halaby makes her own stance clear from the very beginning, immediately putting the unthinking believer of all those stereotypes on the defensive and – perhaps – making the more reasonable among them start to question their own unthinking prejudices, or at least those of their compatriots.

*Once in a Promised Land* (2007) thus emerges as an anti-essentialist response to the official as well as the popular discriminatory discourse against Arab and Muslim Americans in the United States in the landscape of the attacks' aftermath. The aim of this chapter is to examine the novel's depiction of the American dream from an Arab American perspective in a post 9/11 age of intolerance and terror. I will explore the protagonists' pursuit of this dream, which has distanced them from their Arab origins, to embrace the American consumerist tendency of their upper-middle-class lifestyle. I will then investigate their subsequent downfall, as they are suddenly alienated from the American lifestyle they have adopted for years, and consequently become estranged even from one another, leading to the collapse of their marriage, and converting their American dream into a nightmare.

## 5.1 Embracing America

The American Declaration of Independence of 1776 proclaims that the people of the United States of America are entitled to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” indicating that everybody should be able to achieve some level of fulfilment through hard work, persistence and determination. The origin of the American dream concept can be traced back to this phrase, although it did not receive any kind of formal definition before 1931, the year that James Truslow Adams published his book entitled *The Epic of America*. In this book, Adams asserts that the American dream is

that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyman with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement...it is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404)

Despite the strong belief in this dream, Stephen Matterson, among others, draws attention to the many criticisms that have been leveled at it in literature, claiming

that the material aspect of the dream is a corruption of its social vision; that it is an illusion through which inequalities are maintained and class realities are concealed; that it fosters individual achievement at the expense of social progress; that it supports ruthless plutocracy; that it equates personal fulfillment with material gain, and that it results in a narrowly selfish definition of success. (10)

Such considerations have not prevented people from all over the world from being attracted to this dream, firmly believing that reaching the shores of America would give them the opportunity to fulfill their own destiny and have a better life by means of hard work and perseverance.

Salwa's parents were among these people who headed for the United States in order to try their luck there. Salwa was born in Chicago while her parents were

unsuccessfully struggling to achieve their own American dream. Her parents ended up returning to Jordan just after her birth because they “decided that it was not worth losing our souls so we could have nice things. Our lives in Jordan were not so bad, and our life in America was miserable” (Halaby 2007: 70). They made the choice of giving up their unfortunate American experience and taking their four daughters back to their homeland because they preferred a simple life in their own country among their own people to living in America just to get some material gains while the father “was working like a dog in a restaurant” (70). Salwa’s prompt return to Jordan has not prevented her from always dreaming of going back to the country of her birth in order to seek her own opportunities, in her turn, and do what her parents had not been able to: achieve the American dream.

As a student at the University of Jordan, she once sees a flyer on the bulletin board about a lecture entitled “Water is the key to our survival. A lesson in self-sufficiency... by Dr. Jassim Haddad, hydrologist from America” (238). What has mostly attracted her attention, since she is a banking and economics student who has nothing to do with hydrology, is really the “from America” part. In fact, attending this lecture changes the course of her life forever. During the talk, Salwa feels “hypnotized” (245) by the elegant orator, in “his expensive-looking suit and shiny leather shoes” (249-50), and his stories that she has never known before. He leaves her so “transfixed” (246) that, within few days of their first meeting, when he tells her about his intention to meet her family and officially ask her to marry him, she immediately expresses her consent. To his surprise, her answer is quick and clear: “I would like that very much. I would like to go to America too” (68).

Therefore, Salwa accepts Jassem’s proposal because of the attraction of his connection to America. She does not hesitate to sacrifice her relationship with her

boyfriend Hassan, her home and her family in pursuit of the American dream. She is charmed by Jassim's "obvious wealth" (250) and his good job in America that would satisfy her tastes which "are far too expensive for the likes of Hassan" (241). Thus, Jassim has offered Salwa the opportunity to rectify her parents' failed American experience with the promise of wealth and success that America would grant her. At the same time, it seems that Jassim, in his turn, is instinctively attracted to Salwa because of her connection to America too. When he learns about her American citizenship the day of the proposal, he reveals his desire to get it too: "At the very back of Jassim's mind, in only the faintest lettering, was the idea that Salwa's American citizenship would enable them both to stay. Forever, if he chose" (70). Although he tells Salwa's father about his intention to come back to Jordan for good after a year or so, he realizes that Salwa's citizenship would allow him to stay as long as he wants in his beloved America. Hence, both Salwa and Jassim are mutually attracted to one another, whether consciously or unconsciously, thanks to their link to America, which leads them to leave behind the desert of the Middle East to settle down in the desert of Tucson, Arizona, with the hope of realizing their American dream.

Halaby portrays the couple's upper-middle-class life devoid of any reference or connection with their homeland's Middle Eastern values and religion. In this context, Alixa Naff, in her analysis of the Arab American experience in the United States, points out that "In their eagerness to succeed, the immigrant generation neglected to preserve their cultural heritage" (35). Accordingly, Salwa and Jassim have voluntarily taken part in an Americanization process seducing them away from their cultural and religious roots, and thoroughly immersing them in the consumerist comfort of America's capitalist ideals. They are portrayed as a non-practicing Muslim couple who are able to accumulate material luxuries thanks to Jassim's important position at Arizona's water

company and Salwa's work as a banker and a real estate broker: the couple has been trying to fill the void engendered by the lack of spirituality in their American way of life by secular and materialistic means.

Jassim has created a rigid routine for himself starting early in the morning when "he got up, washed his face, brushed his teeth, and relieved himself, the beginning of a morning ritual as close to prayer as he could allow... Jassim did not believe in God, but he did believe in Balance. At five o'clock, with the day still veiled, Jassim found Balance" (Halaby 2007: 3). He has been acting out this ritual of his for years now: "Four days a week he woke up at this time, usually a minute or two before the alarm, so he could drive to the Fitness Bar, swim, come home, and still be able to spend morning time with his wife, Salwa" (3). He leaves his fancy house and drives his fifty-thousand-dollar Mercedes "in a silent nine minutes" trip towards the Fitness Bar for his morning forty-minute swim. Jassim seems to substitute the Muslim morning ritual prayer with this ceremonial swim. Instead of waking up early to do a ritual ablution with water, known as "wudu," in order to perform the dawn prayer, or "salat al-Fajr," he drives his car: "Driving alone in the dark, alone anywhere, anytime filled Jassim with peace and pleasure; driving was a secret drug, a secret god" (3). Therefore, this special god of his leads him to the gymnasium pool where he submerges himself in water and performs his swimming ritual. Consequently, over his many years of swimming, he feels that his "lung capacity increased as his belief in God dwindled" (46).

On the other hand, unlike Jassim who is overtly described as an unbeliever, there is no explicit evidence in the novel confirming or denying Salwa's faith in God. While she is portrayed as a non-practicing Muslim, she still uses many expressions and phrases mentioning the name of God. For instance, she once says: "There is no god but

God” (89), which is the first part of the “shahada.”<sup>60</sup> She also often makes use of the expression “Thank God” (59). Once she addresses her Lebanese friend and tells her: “God protect you, Randa” (90). This kind of expression is commonly used in the Arabic language; and it does not necessarily express the individual’s degree of devotion. Anyhow, throughout the novel, Salwa is portrayed as not particularly spiritual, as she is rarely engaged in any religious practices.

In this way, the Haddads have become avid participants in the American consumer culture, believing it to be the sign of their belonging to America. Both of them are fully engaged in their longed-for American life, mainly composed of “a giant house filled with desired items, cars too large to fit in their owners’ garages, fine designer clothes to decorate the manicured body and all to cover the shell” (101). In this sense, the couple’s luxurious house reminds us of an episode in Halaby’s novel *West of the Jordan* (2003) when Hala, one of the young female cousins, describes the “high-class American style” house of her uncle and his American wife. She perceives it as “High-class American blah, no soul, no colors, only outside walls that wandered in and stayed. Show-off house with no heart nor fancy bracelets” (Halaby 2003: 217). Jassim and Salwa’s house seems to share this same luxurious style that Hala ends up rejecting, seeing it as a threat to the survival of her memories of home as well as to the negotiation of her transnational identity. For her, her uncle’s house is part of the assimilative U. S. landscape that she rebels against.

Nevertheless, this is not the case of Jassim and Salwa, who are totally absorbed by this assimilative tendency; and their house is a good example of that as it does not contain any allusion to their Arab background:

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<sup>60</sup> The shahada is the first of the five pillars of Islam which means declaring belief in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as His Prophet. It states that: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”

That afternoon, driving up recently repaved asphalt to his nestled-in-the hills home, Jassim pulled up his glinty Mercedes next to one of many identical expectant mailboxes, each painted a muted rusty brown ... Briefcase, burdens and mail in hand, leather shoes crunching over pebbles, he went up one, two, three wide brick steps and through the heavy wood door into an extremely cool house. Salwa has forgotten to turn down the air-conditioning before she left. Again... in the coolness of his house, Jassim removed a gleaming glass from a glossy maple cabinet and filled it with the purest spring water money could buy, delivered biweekly up the hills by a gigantic complaining truck he never saw ... he pulled the trashcan out from under the right side of the sink (the spot where 92 percent of Americans keep their kitchen trashcans, he remembered hearing somewhere, though he doubted the statistic) so that he could reach the recycling basket, into which he deposited a handful of direct mail and ads (except for Salwa's overpriced-underwear catalogue, which he took a moment to glance through...). Salwa's two magazines (one with a cover not unlike the catalogue's, the other with a photograph of someone's pristine white living room) found themselves on top of the underwear catalogue. (Halaby 2007: 22-24)

This excerpt makes reference to one of Salwa's passions: sexy and silky lingerie. In fact, she is nicknamed "Queen of Pajamas" by her family because of her fascination for silk pajamas since her childhood when she receives a pair of them as a gift: "she loved the silk pajamas, loved how they made her feel beautiful and almost naked, both at the same time" (47). What she most likes about them is actually the sense of "leisure" attributed to this kind of garment. Consequently, once installed in the United States, she becomes a compulsive shopper, and the more she gets immersed in American consumerism the more the size of her pajamas decreases.

For the first few years after she returned with her new husband to the country of her birth, her pajama purchases were in much the same style as the original pajamas she had worn as a child, with long pants and a long-sleeved shirt with tiny buttons. As she became more accustomed to American life, however, her pajamas narrowed to fit her body more precisely...As her years away from home lengthened and her susceptibility to American marketing increased, her pajamas transformed, morphed from elegant and flowing to tight, more revealing, more alluring. (48)

As Halaby observes, since Salwa started buying drawerfuls of silk pajamas in all sizes and colors, she has steadily consolidated her consumer citizenship in America, erasing, in this way, her transnational links to her homeland.

As I have argued, the Haddads' pursuit of their American dream through consumerism has prevented them from any approximation or involvement in transnational political engagement. It is true that Salwa identifies herself as a "Palestinian from Jordan" (34), but, since her return to the United States, she has never taken part in any kind of activities related to the Arab American communities. Taking into account the status of her own family as Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, it seems that her American life has made her oblivious to the situation of her people. Halaby symbolically marks Salwa's rupture with any commitment to the Palestinian cause the day she decides to marry Jassim and break her engagement with her Palestinian refugee boyfriend Hassan. In fact, "Salwa was appreciative of Hassan's handsome face, sense of humor, and political activism, saw him as a symbol of Palestine" (240). In this sense, her connection to America has obviously won over her bond to Palestine placing her on the side of the powerful part, or the "colonizer" as her father teasingly observes. The day Jassim officially asks her to marry him, Salwa's father asserts that his daughter "is Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship. That is why she uses so much water and has a taste for luxury. We tease her that she is really first world. A colonizer. You see, she even studies money!" (70). Even though he is simply making a joke, his statement reveals that his daughter's American citizenship classifies her among the oppressors, the imperialists, and the powerful. Therefore, Salwa's Americanness, in addition to her eagerness for an American life of her own, has contributed to the erasure of her transnational political consciousness.



As for Jassim, his decision to pursue a career as a hydrologist is inspired by a conversation he has overheard as a child between his father and his uncle Abu Jalal, in which the latter draws attention to the fundamental role of water in the Middle Eastern region, claiming that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is essentially based upon the struggle to control the water resources. In this context, he notes that

All these fools, so worked up over land and rights and they don't see the greater picture. Water is what will decide things, not just for us but for every citizen of the world as well. If we humans were smart, if we were truly as evolved as they say we are, we would all work together to figure out how to turn salt water into drinkable water, how to use water wisely, preserve the water that falls each year ... Mark my words: shortage of water is what will doom the occupants of this earth, and they are fools not to know that. (40-41)

Thus, Abu Jalal's political statement helps open the young boy's eyes to the importance of water policies in the region, which inspires Jassim's passion for water and his subsequent decision to specialize in water management and rainwater harvesting. For this reason, he went to America "filled with dreams of saving Jordan from drought and dependency" (63).

Years later, Jassim delivers a lecture at the University of Jordan – where he meets Salwa for the first time – about water preservation and self-sufficiency. In this lecture, he passionately draws attention to the serious issue of water shortage affecting about "forty per cent of the world's population" (244), and, most importantly, its contribution to the delineation of regional and international politics. His speech echoes the teachings of Abu Jalal when he observes that "the 1967 war started because Israel was caught trying to divert the Jordan away from the West Bank and Jordan. The result of that war was that Israel controlled – controls still – most of the headwaters of the Jordan itself, and is in partial or total control of all the aquifers" (244). Needless to say, this politically conscious speech is delivered before his decision to give up his plans to

return to Jordan and instead to remain in America for good. Unlike Cornelia, his former lover and colleague on his doctoral program, he chooses to stay in the United States. Before leaving for her native South Africa after graduating, she declines his marriage proposal, reminding him that: "I have to go home, Jassim. You have to go home. We are both of us wedded to our countries to change" (63). However, Jassim chooses to wed his "*Made in USA*" Salwa (47) and, therefore, to tie his destiny to America for ever. In this way, his status has changed from a temporary sojourner to a permanent resident; and in the meanwhile, his aforementioned political consciousness and eagerness to become actively involved in his home country's water affairs in order to put into practice his U.S. acquired knowledge, have steadily faded. Hence, Jassim has obviously got "used to this easy American life" (278).

Among other signs of this easy life, for instance, is his abandoning Middle Eastern culinary traditions for the comfortable American habit of ordering takeaway food that he fondly appreciates: "Thankful for the luxury of living in a country where any kind of food is minutes away, he got the pile of menus from a drawer beneath the counter and began picking through. Ethiopian – too far away. Italian – no. Pizza – no. Thai... yes, Thai food would be perfect" (131). Moreover, it is relevant to mention here the absence of hot home-made food in the Haddads' household. In this sense, Salwa makes use of the fancy kitchen of her fancy house only once to cook dinner throughout the novel. This adaptation to American eating habits is another element which reveals the advanced Americanization process the Haddads are going through. As Nathalie Handal observes, food, being "an identity definer... has been one of the most powerful cultural transmitters leading Arab-Americans to their roots, and through food they have preserved their roots" (2006:139). She stresses that "food is [a] leading cultural component" (139) which plays a fundamental role in the survival of Arab traditions. In

this respect, “Arab immigrants consider that if their children and grandchildren eat Arabic food and like it, this confirms that they have embraced their roots and that they belong to that civilization and honor it” (140). On these grounds, Jassim and Salwa’s loss of Arab culinary habits reinforces their assimilative tendency towards the consolidation of their sense of belonging to the United States and the accelerated erasure of the connection to the Arab homeland. In fact, the couple’s relationship with the members of the Arab American communities is limited to Salwa’s Lebanese friend Randa and her family.

It is reasonable to assume that Halaby is critical of this kind of false belonging to the United States that the immigrants – in this case Arabs – find themselves involved in. She considers that America has seduced the Haddads away from their cultural and religious values in return for a consumer citizenship based on the promise of wealth and prosperity. In this sense, the writer suggests that Jassim and Salwa have willingly sacrificed the values as well as the spiritual component of their Middle Eastern culture in order to embrace the materialistic ideals of America’s capitalist culture that their economic success has given them access to. Thus, the only wealth that American can provide them with is monetary. In this way, Halaby extends her critique to twenty-first-century America that she perceives as the land where money is apparently the first concern. She disapproves of America’s “consumer culture [that] is premised upon the expansion of capitalist commodity production which has given rise to a vast accumulation of material culture in the form of consumer goods and sites for purchase and consumption” (Featherstone, 13).

Halaby, therefore, draws attention to the futility of the immigrants’ adoption of this false sense of belonging to America through the example of Jassim and Salwa, who come to realize the moral emptiness of their life in the United States when their short-

lived American dream turns into a nightmare in the post-September 11 landscape. The couple's economic success and their deliberate assimilative tendency prove to be insufficient for them to be accepted as members of the American community due to their ethnic and religious backgrounds.

## **5.2 The Collapse of Jassim and Salwa's American Dream**

In this section, I hope to trace the steps in the downfall of this couple as a consequence of a series of events which start to take place when the terrorist attacks impinge on their lives. These tragic attacks lead Jassim and Salwa to understand that all the luxuries they have been accumulating and surrounding themselves with cannot make up for the growing alienation they are experiencing. The more their isolation increases, the more they become conscious of their Arab identities that they have been trying so hard to ignore and even eradicate.

At first, they don't think about the possible repercussion of the attacks on their own lives. For instance, when they start receiving calls from their families in Jordan to check if they are all right after the attacks, Jassim does not understand their worries. He thinks: "They were all intelligent human beings, and knew that America was a large country and that New York was on the East Coast, and yet they had called to see if he and Salwa were safe. It was ridiculous, and he had told his father so. 'Baba, we are so far away, there is nothing to worry about'" (21). Salwa also tells him about her Lebanese friend Randa's worries about the consequences of the terrorist attacks on Arabs living in the United States, and more importantly on her own children. He gives little importance to these fears and says, "Why would anyone hurt Randa's kids? People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the act of a few Saudi

extremists who destroyed those buildings” (21). Hence, Jassim dismisses any possible essentialist perception that could associate them with suspect individuals or could lead to reactions of race or religious hatred because of what had occurred. He is reluctant to accept such a possibility. However, “He had promptly been proved wrong when a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix was killed *in retaliation*” (21).

Shortly after that, the Haddads find themselves face to face with anti-Arab bias for the first time in one of their visits to the mall when a shop assistant calls a security guard to check on Jassim while he is waiting for Salwa outside a store. He tells his wife that he is being followed by “a woman with a walkie-talkie on her shoulder. She thinks she’s Clint Eastwood... Apparently I am a security threat” (28). The woman informs them that she is simply doing her job “to protect the security of this establishment” (29). Salwa furiously heads back to the shop clerks and confronts them: “Why did you call that security guard on my husband? ... Did you think he was going to climb up and steal that motorcycle? Or perhaps run off with some T-shirts?” (29). One of the clerks responds, “He just scared me ... He just stood there and stared for a really long time, like he was high or something. And then I remembered all the stuff that’s been going on” (30). Amazed, Salwa replies, “You thought he might want to blow up the mall in his Ferragamo shoes” (30). She is dismayed at the girl’s suspicion of Jassim just because of his Middle Eastern features, despite his wealthy appearance and especially his expensive designer shoes. This scene clearly reveals that the Arab American woman expects her husband’s class position to blur his ethnic background. According to her, Jassim should be judged by his wealthy looks, those of a successful “professional man in his forties” (30), instead of by his racial features. Thus, it seems that Salwa is more bothered by the fact that her husband is being profiled as a potential terrorist, in spite of

his middle-class background and his designer outfits, than that Arabs in general are being targeted.

After that, when Salwa learns about the death of the clerk's uncle in the attacks, she responds: "I am sorry to hear that. Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now?" (30). She realizes that the girl is trying to avenge her uncle's death. From that moment onwards, the couple start anticipating what might happen to them in the coming days. They become increasingly aware of the adoption by many Americans of the discourse propagated by the rhetoric of American politicians at the onset of the "war on terror." It is now clear that Middle Eastern ethnicity itself has become suspect.

Needless to say, Halaby makes of the September 11 terrorist attacks a turning point in the Haddads' lives. The collapse of each of the twin towers of the World Trade Center comes to symbolize the downfall of Jassim and Salwa as a consequence of a series of tragedies that has invaded the routine of their quiet lives. The spiritual emptiness of the American life they have chosen to adopt, in addition to their disconnection from their homeland's culture and values, contribute to the couple's fragility as well as unpreparedness to confront the subsequent events. Besides, they are forced to get out of the elite bubble they have been living within previously and to approach unknown American realities when they come into contact with people from lower classes. Hence, Jassim and Salwa become increasingly estranged from one another and start to befriend strangers in their attempts to re-define their relationship with America. The following two sections will attempt to describe the journey pursued by each of them following the September 11 events.

### 5.2.1 Salwa: Miss Made in America

The first step in Salwa's process of collapse is portrayed through the "Big Lie" (9) that starts to find a place between her and her husband. After nine years in the United States, during which she has been entirely devoted to a quintessentially American lifestyle, the young woman becomes increasingly aware of a certain void shadowing her peaceful life. It seems that silk pajamas and wealth are not able to compensate for the emptiness she starts feeling. Consequently, she stops taking her birth control pills for four consecutive days without her husband's knowledge. Halaby takes the reader into Salwa's thoughts:

Salwa's Lie covered a glorious underbelly. It was not *I didn't take my birth control pill* but instead a much more colorful *For a few years now I've felt that I've been missing something in my life. That's why I got a real estate license. It wasn't enough, though. I think having a child will fill that void. I am going to try to get pregnant, even though Jassim says he doesn't want a child.* (10)

Even the real estate license, that she gets in order to make extra money selling big houses for wealthy American people, turns out to be insufficient for her, which leads her to think about having a baby. However, on the fifth day, coinciding with the date of September 11, she decides to start taking the pills again, but this is too late to prevent her pregnancy. The dimensions of Salwa's lie grow greater as not only does she deliberately miss taking the pills but also gets pregnant without her husband's knowledge.

The more the young woman's suspicions about her pregnancy grow, the more she becomes aware of the difficulty of her life in America due to the new reality created in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Her growing awareness about her Arab identity

and belonging makes her unable to repress her nostalgia for Jordan, for home. For the first time since she has been in America, the following thoughts occur to her:

*We cannot live here anymore.* All those year of schizophrenic reaction to American culture, disdain for the superficial, which she had buried with each new purchase and promotion, a spray of loathing she had denied in order to justify her current arrangement – it all burst forward as if she were seeing it for the first time, as though she had not spent the past nine years living this very life.

*It is different now,* she thought. *If I am pregnant, I cannot raise my child here, away from everything I know. If I am pregnant.* (54)

Thus, the mere thought of her possible pregnancy makes Salwa question her own life in America as she comes to realize the false and artificial sense of belonging that links her to this nation. In this sense, she understands that “the America that pulled at her was not the America of her birth, it was the exported America of Disneyland and hamburgers, Hollywood and the Marlboro man, and therefore impossible to find” (49). Hence, Salwa believes that she cannot raise a child in this America that restricts her access to it, and more importantly calls into question her very place in its society.

Salwa’s recurring thoughts about the nature of her relationship with America are triggered by the fact that she increasingly feels suffocated by the exclusive form of patriotism more and more surrounding her. She thinks, for instance, about Petra, her colleague at the bank. Their association has always been rather distant. However, “In the past month that distance had been stronger, an aftereffect of what had happened in New York and Washington, like the cars sprouting American flags from their windows, antennas to God, electric fences willing her to leave” (54). Salwa’s discomfort grows further when Joan, her boss at the real estate agency, hands her two American flag decals for her and Jassim, suggesting that they should hang them in the back window of their cars. Joan explains that, “You never know what people are thinking, and having this will let them know where you stand” (55). Thus, while the boss seems concerned



by Salwa's safety, she implicitly reveals her intention to convey an "imperative patriotism" (Salaita 2011: 89) to her.

In this context, Michael Sally-Jensen asserts that, "Following the events of September 11, 2011, the American flag has enjoyed a renewed popularity. As a show of patriotism, Americans have been buying and displaying flags at an increased rate... The flag is displayed as a show of support to troops serving overseas and stateside to defend the values it represents to many Americans" (47). Besides, Steven Salaita points out that

Hanging the American flag on one's car in the week following the events of September 11 might mean many things: solidarity with the victims of the attacks; a token of mourning; support for the government; a metaphorical blank check for the use of military action. But no matter what their inspiration, most of those who hang flags assumed that a particular meaning would be transmitted and understood. (2011: 89)

In this way, Salwa feels Joan's pressure, urging her to show her patriotic inclination towards the American nation through clarifying her position as to whether she is with "us" or with "them." According to Joan, Salwa and her husband could inspire mistrust and suspicion; that is why she considers that they need to hang American flags in order to confirm that they belong to the good Arab/Muslim American category.

This certainly implies that Salwa is required to distance herself from her Arab self and show her unconditional support for the general rhetoric dominating the official American political discourse of the time, based on an "us/them binary." In this context, Carol Fadda-Conrey rightly notes that,

A persistent and insidious aspect of the us/them binary prevalent after 9/11 is an acknowledgement (albeit a short-sighted one) of the porous and fluid nature of transnational identities, by which the Arab/Muslim other (as conceived and constructed by so-called patriotic agendas) is no longer exclusively located outside the realm of the US nation-state. Instead, the difference allocated to a "them," who are positioned as backward and uncivil Arabs over there in the Arab/Muslim world, is simultaneously inscribed on the racialized bodies of Arab Americans over here in the U.S. Such logic yields a culture of suspicion and paranoia that uses religious and ethnic markers as yardsticks for

determining the American from the un-American, regardless of citizenship status. (2011: 534-35)

Accordingly, for many Americans, it has become fundamental to employ efforts in order to control and contain the Muslim/Arab “Other,” identified as the enemy within. On these grounds, Salwa is dismayed by the message of hatred transmitted through a radio station to the nation. The host’s voice and tone startle her: “Is anyone fed up yet? Is anyone sick of nothing being done about all those Arab terrorists? In the name of Jesus Christ! They live with us. Among us! Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us. They just want...” (Halaby 2007: 56). Therefore, Salwa’s mounting indignation about the rising anti-Arab bias around her makes her perceive even the American flag as a symbol of hatred and discrimination against her and against Arab people with whom she has been forced to identify again.

In another episode, Salwa, once more, has to experience discrimination based on her ethnicity and religion at her workplace when she is verbally abused by one of the bank’s customers. The woman, who identifies herself as “a native Tucsonan, American born and raised” (114), refuses to be helped by a Palestinian from Jordan. She declares that, “I’d feel more comfortable working with someone I can understand better” (114). Salwa at once ironically responds: “Of course. Would you like to work with a Mexican man or an American lesbian?” (114). She also gives her the option to work with the bank’s Chinese American manager. In this context, as Georgiana Banita observes, Halaby’s intention is to show that “after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as second-rate citizens but also as social hazards” (246). In fact, Salwa becomes more and more aware of this new situation and, more importantly, about the deceptive sense of belonging that has linked

her to the country of her birth, which makes her scrutinize “the life she was living. *Denying reality. That’s what I’ve been doing. Killing time, not living*” (56).

Salwa’s hardships become worse when the lie established between her and Jassim gets bigger. The miscarriage that she suffers and initially hides from her husband can be considered another turning point in her life, foreshadowing her eventual breakdown. The idea of conceiving a child has provided her with the hope of filling the growing void dominating her dull and predictable American life. She perceives the baby as a solution for the emptiness of her cold and comfortable house. However, the traumatic experience of the miscarriage leads Salwa to question her whole marriage and her choice to leave the man she loved and to move to America with Jassim who “had offered her the best opportunity” (100). Thus, the young woman comes to realize that “this was the life she had chosen, but it was not the life she wanted” (90). Her current situation has raised many doubts about the longed-for American life that her husband has provided for her, only to find that, “her American freedom had given her exactly that: American freedom” (202), and nothing else.

Consequently, the miscarriage significantly contributes to worsening the void created in Salwa’s life, leading her to further distance herself from her husband. In this context, Halaby points out that

Emptiness is a dangerous substance, allows its possessor to believe in taking rash measures, as a way to fill up the tank cheaply... Salwa desperately wanted to fill it, but having nothing to barter with, no weapons and no maps with which to find a well, she was left with nothing more than her own flimsy silk-pajama fantasies of *potential*. Today, this translated into welcoming what came her way, in the form of a job in a real estate office that netted tens of thousands of extra dollars, and in the form of a young college student with a tongue that tried to dance in Arabic. (202-03)

As I have already argued, the new circumstances that have interrupted Salwa’s routine reveal that she is not prepared to deal with these hardships due to her spiritual and moral

paucity cultivated during her seven-year residence in the United States. Despite her growing awareness of her new reality as well as the necessity to rethink her relation to America and her homeland, she finds herself in a point of no return. In this way, she distances herself “from God and from all she knew to be right in the world,” by having an affair with Jake, her younger co-worker at the bank.

Salwa, looking for comfort after all the hardships that America has forced her to endure, lets herself be seduced by this WASP young man. It is reasonable to assume that the woman wants to avenge herself against this country which has classified her as an outcast, through her involvement with a white man many years her junior. She chooses him in order “to throw her faithfulness out of her customized American window” (203), which reveals that she gets seduced, and even trapped, by America, once more. Actually she has no idea who this part-time worker really is. Apart from his studies at university and his job at the bank, Jake is a white-collar drug dealer who does hard drugs. Halaby observes that, “It was as though he were two people: one who went through the day doing what was expected of him, going to class, going to work, and one who was entirely focused on maintaining his high and having sex” (170). Even his interest in learning Arabic is related to his addiction, as he thinks it is “the language of opium.” Here, Halaby explains between parenthesis that “since he told no one his reason for taking the class, no one could correct him and tell him that Arabic was quite definitely not the language of opium” (52). Jake actually refers to Afghanistan, the country which dominates world opium production. Hence, the young American seems oblivious to the fact that Afghanistan is not an Arab country. Opium has other languages and Arabic is none of them. In this way, the writer reveals Jake’s essentialist perception of Arab and Islamic countries, which is not at odds with the average American’s knowledge, or rather lack of knowledge, about this part of the world.

Exoticism is another reason for Jake's interest in the Arabic language, as he "thought it might seem exotic if he spoke a distant foreign language" (52). Once more, Halaby highlights the profusion of orientalist representations that dominate the West's approach to the Middle East. Based on this misconception, Jake finds room for Salwa in his orientalist caricatures portraying the Arab female as a "veiled woman and exotic whore" (Kadi, xvi). Moreover, the young man's internalization of one of the West's predominant exotic "image[s] of the Middle East as a space of erotic, sexualized fantasy" (Jarmakani, 1), reaffirms the stereotypes and misperceptions of Arab and Muslim cultures in the United States, and in this case, the orientalist and sexist representations of Arab women. In this respect, Amira Jarmakani rightly notes that "the categories of the veil, the harem, and the belly dancer have circulated in U.S. popular culture for over a century as interpretive schemata through which U.S. consumers of the image could engage with the themes of erotic fantasy, patriarchal domination, and tradition, and timelessness, to name a few" (2). Besides, she draws attention to the fact that "representations of Arab womanhood in U.S. popular culture are quite varied and contradictory. In the contemporary context, for example, images of exoticized and hypercommodified belly dancers coexist with representations of the veil as a cloak of submission and oppression" (7).

Thus, Salwa's background as an educated and successful professional does not prevent Jake from profiling her as a sexual object in harmony with the widespread stereotype of the "easily available Harem girl" (Jarmakani, 8). The colleague that Jake perceives as "the gorgeous Arab" has definitely become "an obsession" (Halaby 2007: 170). He feels "a gigantic need to be with her physically. Behind each conversation sat that need, that wanting, to the point where it was almost unbearable" (170). Halaby reveals the combination of motives that lead to Jake's deep attraction to Salwa: "She

was mature without seeming old. This mixed with her foreignness made her sophisticated. Exotic. And married. The challenge of this combination turned him on, and he wondered if all Arab women had this allure (the physical one and the shadow of a man behind them) and if that was why they veiled themselves” (171). Therefore, the duality of harem and veil triggers Jake’s growing sexual desire towards Salwa. For this reason, taking her to bed becomes a challenge for him that he has to fulfill, circumventing what he considers to be her husband’s control. He dreams of releasing her from the dark Arab male’s oppression in order to integrate her into a white American man’s world of sexual fantasy. So now Jake has another reason to learn Arabic: “it was because he desperately wanted to make love to an Arab woman and he thought this was the best way to get to her” (171).

Unaware of Jake’s real motives, Salwa succumbs to his courting. When he invites her for dinner in his apartment for the first time, she hesitatingly decides to go only to cancel the date, to finally end up in bed with him:

she allowed an American boy to push off her shoes with his toes, to unbutton her shirt and remove it, allowed him to unzip her skirt and place her clothes neatly on a chair next to the futons... Watched as he removed his own clothing in a heap... He knelt on the floor and she allowed him between her legs while she sat on the edge of the futons, in her matching bra and panties, lacy and lovely, recently purchased from Victoria’s Secret and worn, coincidentally, for the first time today... she vanished and became a part of him, an adored, desired, and moving part of this young American man, barely more than a boy. (210)

Hence, “intrigued ... by her ability to let it happen” (212), Salwa allows herself to be desired and loved by Jake in order to compensate for her frustration for miscarrying the child that Jassim did not want in any case, and for being rejected by America.

After their first sexual intercourse, Salwa starts looking at the reflection of her naked body in the mirror of the bedroom closet and thinks: “Is this what Jake had seen and said was beautiful? She searched for herself in this reflection, pleading for

familiarity with the thick legs, wide hips, round breasts, simple face, nothing like the bodies and faces shown on American television” (211). Although Salwa recognizes her Arab shape and features in contrast with American ones, she is unable to find herself in the reflection in front of her. In an act of self-recognition, she finds an Arab body with no Arab soul. Once more, the young woman realizes the extent of the de-culturation tendency she has adopted during her stay in America. In an American man’s bedroom, she observes the reflection of her naked body. Thus, they “were face to face, almost touching. They stared at each other, stranger at stranger. One loved silky pajamas and was outraged by injustice; the other had allowed a baby to die within her and in compensation had let herself be entered by a man who was not her husband” (211). However, she allows this stranger part of her to enjoy being unfaithful to her husband with Jake: “she didn’t want him to stop” because she “became someone new” (212).

Salwa’s connection with Jake introduces her to a new world unknown to her so far. On the one hand, she is experiencing new sensations based on thrilling encounters of “American sex” (158) followed by feelings of guilt. While she “thought she could live like this for ever, floating in pleasure” (212), she washes away her lover’s traces in order to not “smell Jake on her the whole way home and be disgusted” (213). On the other, this affair takes Salwa out of her upper-middle-class neighborhood and makes her discover a new face of America. Her encounters with Jake introduce her to a lower-class reality for the first time. She observes Jake’s apartment complex composed of “a series of identical misshapen two-story cubes painted different shades of brown to blend in with the desert” (206). In her first visit to this apartment, her car window is shattered and all her cash is stolen from her purse that she has left there. In this way, Salwa is forced to encounter realities of American poverty that she has been blinded to before. It is reasonable to assume that Halaby means to reveal that Salwa’s prior commitment to

American capitalism has prevented her from discovering the nation's class hierarchy while she is contained in her middle-class bubble.

Consequently, Salwa's growing alienation makes her turn to her Lebanese friend Randa looking for comfort because she is the one who "reminded her of home" (91). Unlike Salwa, the Lebanese woman has managed to keep her "fingers stuffed with centuries of wisdom, knots of history and meaning" (91), thanks to her uninterrupted connection with her religious as well as her cultural heritage. In this way, Randa has not let America persuade her to lead an all-American lifestyle like her friend, and has retained her devotion to religion and her Arab traditions. She provides her American house with some flavors of her homeland like the Arab TV channels, for instance. She tells her friend: "You don't know what you're missing without satellite TV. It's like being home" (283). Hence, the day she feels like confessing to someone about her infidelity, Salwa decides to meet her Lebanese friend. She remembers how her "brown habits turned white with practice" (282) and ends up heading to Randa's house without calling before, as opposed to American ways. There, Randa brings the taste of home to Salwa through the Arabic coffee she prepares for her:

Randa cracked three cardamom pods, ground the seeds with a pestle, and dropped the tiny grains into the water... The water bubbled wildly and Randa pulled the pot off the burner and added two spoonfuls of coffee, each heaped to the ceiling. She stirred them in, reached across the continental United States, stretched her arm across the Atlantic until she found Beirut, and put the pot back on the burner, and it boiled, and she stirred in her love for her friend, and it boiled, and she smiled at Salwa, and the coffee boiled away thousands of miles of homesickness, and Randa turned off the burner. (283-84)

Salwa observes her friend who "looked relaxed. Happy. Welcoming" (282) and asks her if she is happy in America. Randa's answer is significant as it reveals her own perception of happiness and of life in America. She expresses her satisfaction with her family life and explains that she is happy with her husband and children. Moreover, her



conception of America is quite different from Salwa's. She explains: "Do I love America? It certainly is easier here than at home. You live your life without being burdened by basic needs, so you can focus on larger things. But American life, as I see it, lacks flavor, that tastiness you find at home" (283). Therefore, Randa tries to fill her life in America with the flavor and taste of home through retaining a strong connection with her Arab heritage. Salwa now comes to appreciate her friend's negotiated lifestyle where she combines her homeland's values with the host country's, without being seduced by American temptations like her friend. Salwa asks her the following question: "Don't you ever worry about losing yourself here?" to which Randa replies: "No, I keep what is important and the rest is just... *superficial*" (283).

When Salwa confesses her affair with Jake to Randa, her friend advises her to go back to Jordan and spend some time there: "'You need to go home for a little while. You need to be with your mother and sisters' *And your culture, where things like this can't happen...*" (288). Thus, Randa argues that Salwa needs to regain her sense of belonging to her homeland and to recuperate her Arab and Muslim identities that have been undermined during her stay in the United States. In this way, according to Randa, the solution for Salwa's growing feelings of displacement is to go back home for a while in order to regain her true self and save her marriage. Salwa decides to take her friend's advice and "resolved to fly away and tuck herself into the safety of her true home" (289). Obviously, while Jordan comes to stand for safety, according to the young woman, America represents the nightmare that she wants to escape. Salwa recognizes that "this was the life she had chosen, but it was not the life she wanted" (91).

After she takes the decision to leave "*while [she] still can*" (289), she heads to her lover's apartment to say goodbye. There, in the garden, she sees three Mexican immigrant gardeners digging in the soil; and she "imagined the miles of desert they

must have crossed for the opportunity to trim and mow and prune, the perils they must have endured to have their clear shot at the American Dream. 'It's a lie!' she wanted to shout. 'A huge lie.'" (316). Salwa feels identified with these Mexican immigrants who obviously do not enjoy her upper middle class status and who, just like her, have left their homelands for the pursuit of the American dream. Unlike her, they have ended up working in difficult and hard conditions, occupying the bottom of the social scale. It is reasonable to assume that Salwa seems to see and recognize these kinds of people for the first time in her life. She cannot prevent herself from feeling solidarity with these immigrants with whom she shares the same immigrant experience in spite of her American citizenship: "She looked at those dark men... and from a distance she could see their sacrifices, the partial loss of self that they too must have agreed to in coming to America" (317).

However, Salwa's aim of returning to Jordan in order to recuperate the lost part of herself clashes with her lover's expectations of making her leave her husband to be with him. To her dismay, he shouts: "So you are running back to the pigsty?" (320). Once she crosses the doorstep, he attacks her physically with a picture silver frame, while he screams: "Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch! You ruined everything" (322). He repeatedly smashes the frame on her, leaving her body bruised and cut, and her face disfigured. Jake's vicious reaction reveals that the fact of being rejected by Salwa, by a Muslim Arab woman, has deeply dented his self-esteem. Being a white American male, he refuses to be rejected by a Muslim female that he has managed to manipulate and sexually dominate for a while. Moreover, he feels that his masculinity has been harmed and challenged when he loses control of Salwa, taking into account that his attitude towards her has been that of the submissive and docile Arab female that he is familiar with through American media. For this reason, he considers it to be unacceptable to be

abandoned by a supposedly submissive and inferior woman. Consequently, the only way for him to restore his masculine as well as racial superiority over Salwa is through the use of his physical strength, beating her and maiming her beautiful face.

Helped by one of the Latino gardeners while waiting for the ambulance, “Salwa lay bathed in shame; at that moment she would have given the world to have found the rewind button. She would never have said yes to Dr. Haddad” (323). Hence, she ends up in the hospital in a critical condition, with Jassim by her side unaware of the motives behind what has occurred.

### **5.2.2 Jassim: The frustrated perfectionist**

Through Jassim’s character, Halaby recounts the story of a successful scientist who happens to be a Muslim Arab living in America in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. The succession of tragedies that befall him, and over which he has no control, leads to his downfall. Just after the attacks, and unlike his wife, Jassim has remained reluctant to think about the possible consequences of such events on his life. In this sense, he considers that Randa’s worries about her children’s safety are irrational and exaggerated. Moreover, he is unable to see the connection between the attacks and his office secretaries’ change of attitude towards him. He thinks, “Why? Surely not because of what happened in New York? He had as little connection to those men as they did, and there was no way he could accept that anyone be able to believe him capable of sharing in their extremist philosophy. No, he was not indulging this notion” (Halaby 2007: 22). Jassim does not find any reason for the girls’ behavior during the meeting a day after the attacks, as “at the far end of the table from him [they] stared and scribbled notes to each other. It was clear that he was the subject of these notes” (25).

In addition to that, he realizes that the secretaries are not the only ones who behave strangely that day: “Jassim felt a vague prickle as he reviewed his comments at the meeting, as he analyzed the dropped gazes of several of the staff members, the less than warm reception he has received from the city’s engineers, a group who usually welcomed him with doughnuts and laughter” (25-26). Nevertheless, Jassim decides to prevent paranoia from affecting his mind and to stop thinking about the meeting and his colleagues’ behavior. “‘Finish,’ Jassim said aloud, refusing to entertain paranoid thoughts” (26). Jassim’s denial of the new reality persists for some time during which he just counts on the good intentions of the American people surrounding him, believing that he would not be mistaken for someone who sympathizes with terrorists. His naïve way of thinking about this specific prickly subject is explained by his belief that his professional success and consumer citizenship would protect him during this kind of national crisis. He thinks that as he has nothing to do with extremist and terrorist ideologies, no one will raise any doubts about him. Moreover, Jassim does not attach any importance to his wife’s worries after the assassination of the Sikh gas station attendant in response to the terrorist attacks, when she warns him that this “sort of retaliation there is going to be at governmental level for what happened. Jassim, it’s not going to be easy, especially for you” (21). Salwa’s warning is pertinent, taking into account the nature of her husband’s job as a hydrologist having access to the Arizona water deposits. However, Jassim keeps ignoring the increasing signs which foreshadow the downfall of his American dream.

The images of destruction haunt Jassim’s imagination for days and even disturb the peace of his morning swimming ritual. Once in the pool,

his mind wrapped around the pictures of those two massive buildings collapsing to the ground so neatly beneath the columns of smoke, that he returned to the impossibility of what he had seen. What entered into someone’s mind to make him (them!) want to do such a thing? It was

incomprehensible. And unnatural – human beings fought to survive, not to die. And had they, those many people who seemed to join together in crazy suicide, had any idea that they would cause such devastation? That both buildings would collapse? Lap after lap found him turning this over in his mind, the planning of destruction and the extent of that destruction. (20)

Jassim's scientific mind restricts his thinking to the physical and material extent of destruction as he actually seems unable to imagine the possible repercussion of the attacks on his own life as well as on his fellow Arabs and Muslims living in America. In fact, Jassim's nightmare – and subsequent downfall – starts the day he learns about his wife's secret pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage

From the very beginning of that day, Jassim is prevented from finding his emotional balance through his ceremonial swim. When he gets to the gym early in the morning, the receptionist informs him that the pool is closed because someone has defecated in it. Hence, he heads back home to find Salwa sobbing loudly. Her confession about her pregnancy and miscarriage unsettles him to the point that when he, exceptionally, goes to the pool after work for a swim looking for peace and balance, he cannot prevent himself from thinking about the baby and the miscarriage. In his drive back home, he is so disturbed and anxious that he feels "sweat occupying the space between his hands and the polished steering wheel, the first sign that he and the car are not really One" (116-17). Consequently, Jassim has an accident as he runs over Evan Parker, a teenager on a skateboard, and kills him. Therefore, the Arab man's world starts falling apart that same day, as not only does he hide the boy's death from Salwa, but he also becomes disconnected from his wife and from his daily routine. The consequence of these events, that he has no control over, is that Jassim starts neglecting his work, and later finds himself involved in an FBI investigation, and fired from his job.

Needless to say, this accident plays a vital role in revealing that Jassim's sense of belonging to America is false. While standing by Evan lying on the ground before the arrival of the ambulance, he tries to reassure the teenager's friend: "'It's going to be alright,' Jassim said, saying words he did not believe, trying to make that ultimate jump into American life, the one that promises happy ending for everyone if you just believe it hard enough" (119). Thus, Halaby draws attention to the fact that Jassim finally becomes aware of the futile efforts he has been making to be accepted in America. He understands that the accident is about to drive him away from the center of his comfortable upper middle life milieu to the margins. In this way, Jassim is now conscious that American happy endings are not for him, a Muslim Arab living in America. This tragic accident, therefore, paves the way for Jassim's marginalization as well as condemnation because of his ethnic and religious background. He deliberately isolates himself from his wife, already affected by the miscarriage, and hides the tragedy of the accident in order to stop it from upsetting her further.

In the aftermath of this terrible event, Jassim's growing loss of enthusiasm about swimming symbolizes his increasing lack of balance. In the early morning, he feels like a "dead elephant, a giant pinned to his bed by heavy thoughts." (148). When he wakes up in the morning,

Jassim crept into consciousness to find reality worse than any dream, any nightmare... The thinnest voice prodded at him, nudged him towards the edge of the bed. *Swimming is what keeps you even, gives you control*, the voice said.

*I have no control*, Jassim answered back. *No control. It's gone. My life is no longer in my hands*. This thought overpowered a quieter wish for God, for belief, for an answer, or at the very least Balance. He lay at the edge of the bed, his thought a crowded pile of characters competing for space on the marquee: *Salwa Shops for Pajamas, Jassim's Child, Water, Swimming, Officer Barkley...* (148)

Jassim is deeply affected by these two tragedies, made even worse by the loss of connection with his wife, which leads him to try to endure and get through it by himself. The feeling of guilt haunts him, as he considers himself responsible for Salwa's miscarriage for discarding the idea of having any children, and to this is added Evan's death. Jassim even perceives his Mercedes as the "murderous vehicle" (149), or "his death machine" (153).

In the meanwhile, Jassim becomes the subject of racial profiling conducted by some members of his office staff, in addition to Jack Franks, a former U.S. marine who goes to the same gym as him. Consequently, the Arab American man becomes the focus of an FBI investigation based on uncorroborated reports over his work as a hydrologist. In this way, Jassim is pointed out according to the hegemonic racial configuration that marks Arabs and Muslims as fanatical terrorists, threatening U. S. national security. Thus, Halaby here takes the reader to the Bush administration's "war on terror" ethos, when discrimination against Muslims and Arabs became legitimate and justifiable. In this context, Evelyn Alsultany draws attention to what she calls the process of "momentary diversity," which took place after 9/11, consisting of the reconfiguration of race and racism in the United States, and paralleled by "a simultaneous racialization and criminalization of Arabs and Islam" (207). She further explains that,

By momentary diversity, I am referring to a process by which the American citizen came to be ideologically redefined as diverse instead of white and united in the "war on terror," defined in opposition to Arabs and Islam, signifies as terrorist and anti-American. Thus non-Arab, non-Muslim racialized groups became temporarily incorporated into the notion of American identity, while Arabs and Muslims were racialized as terrorist threats to the nation. By racialization, I am referring to the process of assigning derogatory meaning to particular bodies distinguished by ethnicity, nationality, biology, or geography, as well as legitimizing discourses, in this case the process by which the categories "Arab" and "terrorist" came to be conflated, consolidated, and interchangeable. Thus racism toward Arabs and Muslims is configured as legitimate and racism toward other groups illegitimate. (207-08)

Therefore, as Alsultany points out, racism and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims gained legitimacy and even respectability in the United States. This legitimization process was then used in order to justify the government's practices and policies adopted in the "war on terror" context against the members of the Arab and Muslim communities.

In this way, taking into account the increasing depiction of Muslim and Arab citizens as a threat to national security, many of them came under the scrutiny and vigilance of the so-called citizen patriots who were voluntarily collaborating with the government in its "war on terror." Georgina Banita asserts that these "citizens [are] galvanized by Bush's call to act as the eyes and ears of the government" (246). In this context, she makes reference to Judith Butler's concept of "petty sovereigns" who are "instrumentalized, deployed by tactics of power they do not control, but this does not stop them from using power... These are petty sovereigns, unknowing to a degree about what work they do, but performing their acts unilaterally and with enormous consequences" (65).<sup>61</sup> Hence, these hypervigilant citizens start performing "a responsibility initially reserved for members of bureaucratic institutions but now extended to the entire nation" (Banita, 246). It is Jassim's misfortune to come under the vigilance of some of these citizens.

One of these American characters is Jack Franks, with whom Jassim has coincided in the gym a few times. This retired marine in particular feels resentment towards Jordanians in general, triggered by a personal experience. The first day he meets Jassim, shortly before the attacks, he tells him about his daughter who has left the United States to marry her Jordanian lover and settle down in his country: "I went to Jordan once ... Followed my daughter there. She married a Jordanian. Not one like you,

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<sup>61</sup> Butler, Judith. *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004. Print.



though. This one was from the sticks—or the sand, as the case was ... She converted. She's an Arab now. Probably still lives there. Don't know. Haven't talked with her for years" (Halaby 27: 6). It is reasonable to assume that Jack's interest in Jassim is partly motivated by his daughter's case and, particularly, his failure to make her change her mind and return to America. He displays his ignorance about the Middle East when he mentions his daughter's conversion, which reveals the conflation of Arab ethnicity and the Muslim religion. In this respect, Halaby sheds light on a recurrent subject concerning the interchangeable use of the words Arab and Muslim in mainstream America, ignoring the fact that not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab. Hence, Jack considers that his daughter has been seduced away by a Jordanian man to convert into something un-American, which renders the terrorist attacks an opportunity for him to get revenge for his loss. For this reason, Jassim, as a Jordanian man, is an ideal target.

In addition, Jack thinks that by watching Jassim, he will be serving his country and giving a meaning to his life if he gets involved in an official investigation against him. He estimates that Jassim "was not the man he portrayed himself to be, though he was not necessarily sold on his being a terrorist. He had already talked to his FBI friend Samuel about him. Twice. Would continue to keep him posted as Samuel had suggested" (173). To justify himself, Jack takes the reader to the core of the "war on terror" rhetoric, when he reasons to himself the following:

*These are some scary times we live in... My number-one duty is to help protect my country. The president had said that specifically, that it is our job to be on the alert for suspicious behavior, to help the police, to be the eyes and ears of the community. Besides, if it turns out to be nothing, then, no harm done to anyone. Dammit, if you're going to live in this country, you're going to have to abide by the rules here. (173)*

Accordingly, judging Jassim to be a possible threat to the country's security, Jack literally follows the Bush administration's instructions, and decides to lead his own investigation into him in the fitness center, asking for the help of Diane, the gym's early morning clerk, as well as warning the FBI against him.

Jack is not the only one who contacts the FBI concerning Jassim. The "conservative right" (107) office girls, as they are referred to by Marcus, his boss, have done the same thing to him. Bella, the receptionist, is the one who gets in contact with the FBI to report him. Jassim is dismayed to learn that "an FBI investigation [is] launched by a receptionist whose main duties were answering the telephone and making photocopies" (272). According to one of her colleagues, Anita, after September 11, Bella gets so angry that she "wanted to get revenge and [she] wanted to be involved in that revenge" (271). Thus, she has been spying on Jassim and taking notes about everything he says and does. She even notices the changes in his behavior coinciding with Salwa's miscarriage and the tragic accident. Anita explains to Jassim that,

Bella called the FBI on you a couple of days after it happened, told them you were a rich Arab with access to the city's water supply and you didn't seem very upset by what had happened. It seemed the FBI was not interested at first. Bella started to keep a notebook on you. She wrote down everything you said, what you wore, how you seemed. Then two months or so ago she said that she thought something was wrong, that your behavior changed, seemed bothered and that she was going to call the FBI on you again. Report you. (271-72)

Therefore, Bella is convinced that it is her duty towards her country to drive this Arab hydrologist out and prevent his access to the town water supply. She portrays Jassim as the enemy who has to be excluded and if necessarily jailed, trying, in this way, to take justice into her own hands. In addition, she gets in contact with Jassim's clients in order to inform them that he is being investigated by the FBI, which further complicates his situation.

When approached by two FBI agents in his office, Jassim's boss Marcus is appalled that his employee and friend has become the subject of a "witch hunt" (224) sponsored by the state. They ask him about Jassim's religious and political views, about his "reaction to September 11" and "to the war in Afghanistan", as well as about his opinion on "Jordan's leadership" and his political activities (224). Marcus's answers confirm that Jassim belongs to the good citizen category when he portrays him as "reliable and as apolitical and unreligious a person as I know" (224). It is relevant to notice here Halaby's intention to highlight the official perception of a good Arab American citizen as necessarily an apolitical and unreligious person who does not get involved in serious issues related to his community and the Middle East. In this respect, Carole Fadda-Conrey draws attention to "the recurring confluence among political dissent, Muslim identity, and terrorism in national security (as well as public) rhetoric after 9/11" (2011: 544). As I have already argued, the main objective of this official discourse in the U.S. is to radically contrast Arabness, on the one hand, and Americanness, on the other. In this sense, Jassim becomes suspect by the mere fact of being an Arab Muslim man, which signifies the suspension of his membership in the club of American good citizenship. Knowing this, Marcus seems to be aware of his friend's delicate situation from the very beginning, as he first tries to defend him before the FBI agents, and later offers him help.

Moreover, Marcus appears worried about the violation of Jassim's civil rights as he advises him to hire a lawyer due to the seriousness of his situation. In this respect, he complains to his wife about having "the Christian right" working for him (235), and that as a consequence of their attitude, "Jassim could be arrested, maybe even deported" (236). However, asked by his wife if he thinks that "Jassim is capable of doing

something bad to the water supply” (236), Marcus cannot hide his growing distrust towards his friend, questioning his change in behavior:

Something had been different in Jassim lately, something Jassim was not talking to him about. It could be anything, he had told himself over and over. It could be medical, or something in his marriage ... Not for the first time, his wife had brought to the surface the very thing that was nagging at him, harvested that vague doubt that had been lodged way back in his brain, undercutting the faith he had in others. (237)

Obviously, Jassim has not told Marcus yet about his personal troubles, about Salwa’s miscarriage and Evan’s death. Besides, the boss starts receiving calls from the company’s clients who, alerted by Bella and contacted by the FBI, have expressed their intention to stop working with Jassim, now newly labeled as a suspect hydrologist. One of these clients, for instance, asserts that “Jassim has done great work for us in the past, but now I feel I need to scrutinize everything. I need to look at motive, at what he is getting from us. I simply don’t have the time. I want to give you this contract, but as long as he is the senior hydrologist, I cannot” (269).

Consequently, Marcus ends up ceding to pressure and fires Jassim. In fact, the latter “could not change who he was, and Marcus recognized consciously that in part he was firing him for that reason” (296). Moreover, he justifies himself saying that “we’re going to lose the business if I don’t make an act of good faith to the people we do business with” (297). Thus, Jassim’s termination becomes this act of good faith that Marcus needs to make in order to recuperate his lost contracts and save his business, on the one hand, and, on the other, to whitewash his name and that of the company from the traces of the supposed enemy who has been working there for years. Hence, Halaby implies that Jassim’s otherness becomes more and more obvious and noticeable, which makes his presence there unacceptable. Finally, he gets escorted out of the company to his car. Even though Marcus has previously warned Jassim about the possibility of

becoming the subject of a witch hunt, he ends up taking part in it. As Steven Salaita observes, “Even Jassim’s great advocate – his progressive, anti-Republican, antiwar boss, Marcus – has doubts about Jassim’s humanity” (2011: 88).

Hence, Jassim’s struggle to become a good citizen and adopt American ways turns out to have been all in vain at this difficult time. He realizes how artificial his sense of belonging to the United States has been when he is deprived of the opportunity to prove that he is still the same good citizen. In this way, he is excluded on the basis of his ethnic and religious affiliations, emphasizing his un-Americanness. He is definitely perceived as the Other, that is to say, the enemy. Jassim’s situation reminds one of a passage from *Obasan* (1981) by the Japanese Canadian novelist Joy Kogawa, which explores the internment experience of a Japanese Canadian family during WWII. Naomi is a school girl who discovers that she is a “Jap,” and that all Japs are bad. Despite her father’s reassuring her that she is Canadian, Naomi is puzzled by the implications of her discovery: “It is a riddle, Stephen tells me. We are both the enemy and not the enemy” (70). This reveals the paradox of being and not being Japanese and / or Canadian, and dwells too on the members of the community’s desperate attempts to prove themselves Canadians, and their strong sense of belonging to this nation in spite of the trauma of the internment camp. In her analysis of *Obasan*, Eulalia Piñero Gil observes that this novel

represents silence and memory of the Japanese Canadian community during the traumatic experience of the internment. The novel investigates the historical events, the construction of the female and ethnic subjectivities through the voice of its child narrator Naomi Nakane. This is a very painful experience which coincides with Naomi’s identity construction process. Kogawa speaks about the need to describe the internment experience as a historical re-discovery process and the necessary re-definition of the Japanese ethnic identity within the Canadian society. (259)<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Piñero Gil, Eulalia. “*Obasan* de Joy Kogawa: Silencio y memoria de los campos de internamiento en Canadá durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial.” *Ecos de la Memoria*. Ed. Margarita Almela, et al. Madrid: UNED, 2011. 259-272.

Jassim does not have to endure the internment experience, but he comes to understand the futility of such attempts and efforts to be accepted as the process of his marginalization reaches its peak when his professional career is shattered and destroyed. In this respect, he thinks that Americans

shouldn't be able to pull accounts on the basis of his being an Arab. Yes, finally he saw what had been sitting at the back of his consciousness for some time in a not-so-whispered voice: *with or against*. But was he not *with*? *I understand American society*, he wanted to scream. *I speak your language. I pay taxes to your government. I play your game. I have a right to be here*. How could this be happening? (234)

It is hard for Jassim to accept this radical change in his status from being a rich and prestigious hydrologist doing business with the town's most prominent firms, to becoming an unemployed outcast judged to be a risky citizen and a threat to home security. To his dismay, he finds that as an Arab he has no right to be in America anymore. In this sense, Halaby rightly points out that:

In more than a decade of good citizenship, he had never for a minute imagined that his success would be crossed out by a government censor's permanent marker, that his mission would be absorbed by his nationality, or that Homeland Security would have anything to do with him. Things like this aren't supposed to happen in America. (299)

Hence, the American identity Jassim has created for himself during his stay in America has proved to be artificial and illusory as it does not represent a real sense of belonging to this country. This same country, that had once provided him with all the necessary elements for success, is provoking the collapse of his professional career and his life. In this way, an FBI-sponsored witch hunt has cost this Arab man his job as well as his American Dream.

As his own place in American society is called into question, Jassim starts looking at the people on the margins, towards which he himself has recently been

pushed. He feels that “it had taken killing a boy for his soul to awaken ... he saw that the past nine years (and even more than that) had been a sabbatical from real life, a rich man’s escape from the real world” (218). When he abandons his daily swimming ritual, Jassim starts driving aimlessly through the streets early in the morning:

It was still dark as he drove down the comforting, looping street and approached the always busy Oracle Road, where he found there was an entire world awake... A bus has just deposited its human contents by the side of the road and they drifted north and south, some west into the parking lot of an electronics store... Jassim felt as though he were watching a movie. While many times he had driven into the city early, especially years ago, when his work times had not been so regular, he had never noticed these people. (151)

This newly acquired awareness takes him to Penny, a waitress at Denny’s where he starts having greasy American breakfasts, and to Mary, the dead boy’s mother.

At this critical moment of his life, Jassim realizes that he has been living in a bubble preventing him from being in touch with many aspects of American life. After so many years spent in America, he is shocked by his lack of knowledge about the country. For instance, during one of his morning drives, he has the opportunity to make the following reflection:

Daily he traveled, his packed duffel bag ready in case he changed his mind, up and down the streets of Evan’s neighborhood and neighborhoods beyond, greedy to see into lives he knew nothing about. Somehow this aspect of American culture had escaped him. He’d been the edges of it but had been buffered by a job that had him working with a more educated group of people, by an income that had him living among professionals, white-collar as opposed to blue. The more he drove and stared and watched through windows and saw people in their yards and looked at their houses, the more fascinated he became, amazed at the years he had spent without ever really seeing... Jassim’s awareness didn’t happen in one lightening change; no one event occurred to peel all those layers from his eyeballs, to remove the bubble-wrap around his consciousness. The movement of his thoughts was gradual, a smooth inclined ride. (274-75)

It is when Jassim gets introduced to the real America that he meets Penny. He feels immediately connected to her after the faintness he suffers in the cheap diner. The waitress identifies it as “a panic attack.” She explains that, “it’s where you have too much crap loaded in your head and sometimes you just get this electric shock that bangs everything together and for a minute you think you’re going to die, or puke, or pass out, but then it passes” (154). In this way, overwhelmed by sadness and guilt after the accident, Jassim finds consolation in Penny, who just after the September 11 attacks wishes she were younger in order to enlist in the American Army. This feeling fills her every time she listens to the President, as she thinks that serving in the Army would have granted her the opportunity to “show all those terrorists what Americans were made of, how they were continuing the great history of this country, getting out there and saving poor people from the oppression of living in their backward countries” (280).

However, the waitress’s depiction of Arabs as backward and uncivilized terrorists does not include Jassim. In a conversation with her flatmate, she claims that her friend is “not some religious freak like them... Jassim is a good guy – he’s not like them, shouldn’t be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They’re the ones who should be bombed” (281). Penny thus considers that Jassim does not belong to the category that contains the supposed enemies of the American nation, according to the official U. S. discourse. Even though the American woman internalizes the Bush administration’s “war on terror” rhetoric, she does not make use of the “us/them” binary in relation to Jassim. After all, her Arab friend is a wealthy scientist who has nothing to do with the “others” – the dreadful terrorists who deserve to be bombed.



It is reasonable to assume that Jassim's attraction to Penny is triggered by his need to find refuge in someone who does not belong to his world. Although their physical contact is restricted to some kisses, Penny is the strange white American waitress who listens to him after he has been rejected by his colleagues and distanced from his wife. In this respect, Steven Salaita rightly notes that "Jassim's innate attraction to Penny, then, arises from a certain feeling of alienation that he imagines Penny can satisfy. Therefore, Penny's attraction to Jassim arises from the same hope, though she indicates that she is interested mainly in the lifestyle that Jassim's income might provide" (2011: 91). He adds that Halaby makes a balance between Penny's islamophobia and Jassim's classism, which probably would not allow these two characters to converge in different circumstances.

Thus, despite their difference, Jassim's connection with this woman has contributed to his exploration of this unknown face of America. The Wal-Mart experience, for instance, is very telling as it brings him face to face with some Jordanian immigrants who have not had the opportunity to prosper like him:

In one breath he was in the souq in Amman, a place he couldn't stand, for the same reason he wouldn't have liked Wal-Mart if he hadn't been invited to go with Penny: too many poor people, too many products to sift through, all of questionable quality. Too many people squish-squashing their overworked, coughing selves together. Whereas Jassim had been eaten by the West, this woman and her husband had not left home... He was so used to this easy American life, where you could kill a child and the whole family didn't come after you with demands for justice, or at least an explanation. Where you could work with the same people every day of your life and know nothing of them. Or they of you. Where your wife could be pregnant and miscarry and not tell you. Where you could want not to have children. No question: the West was neater, tidier. One could control one's life here so much more easily. (278)

Not only does the Wal-Mart visit allow Jassim to meet American working class subjects but also Arab immigrants belonging to these lower classes. He makes a quick comparison between himself and these people who remind him of the community that

he has been distancing himself from during these long years in America. While Jassim has adopted a Western integrating lifestyle, this Jordanian couple seems rather attached to their homeland's traditions. He asserts that he prefers living in America, though, because he judges that life there is easier to control. However, he is proven wrong when he ends up losing control over his life after the September 11 attacks and the subsequent tragedies, mainly the car accident.

As I have argued, the accident has induced Jassim to have access to an invisible part of America when he starts to drive aimlessly around the dead boy's neighborhood. He is shocked to see "pickup trucks and pink fences, shaved heads and snotty-nosed children, food stamps, tattered smiles, ill-fitting false teeth, tobacco-stained fingers, and fourteen-hour-shift bloodshot eyes" (275). He is unpleasantly surprised by the existence of such poverty in a wealthy country like the United States of America. In this line, encouraged by Penny, he visits the boy's mother, Mary Parker, in order to apologize for the accident and offer help. Once in the house, he is amazed by the poverty of Evan's family: "The living room was dark and thickly carpeted. Shadows of furniture punctuated the room, but it was so dark he couldn't see much beyond that" (196). Mary explains the darkness of her living room by the fact that "for a long time my brother was living with us, and he slept here. I hung blackout curtains so the sun wouldn't wake him, but I never got around to taking them down" (196). With small details such as this, Halaby draws Jassim's attention to the huge difference marking "this unwelcoming American neighborhood" from "the more liberal streets where fear and hatred were disguised" (201). In this way, he develops a new perception of America through the lenses of its "social apartheid" (Banita, 249) on the one hand, and its racial divisions, on the other.

Jassim is forced to slow down his “America bulldozer style, an Arab in a Mercedes, oblivious of the sizzling around him,” as he becomes “unsettled in his beloved America” (Halaby 2007: 165). By the end of the novel, the Jordanian man has lost everything America had promised him upon his arrival there as a student. After enjoying the taste of success, prestige, and wealth, Jassim ends up deprived of all of them, announcing the downfall of his American Dream. Even though he has integrated well into American society, living by its rules, now he gets excluded from it because he officially becomes a threat to national security because of his ethnic and religious background. In this respect, Halaby observes that “wishes don’t come true for Arabs in America” (184), despite the efforts they make to be accepted as normal American citizens. Salwa’s efforts to try “to force everything to fit into an American tale” (159) have also been in vain. Both she and her husband have left the Holy Land – the ancient Promised Land – to follow the false promises of wealth and success in this other American “Promised Land” (49).

In fact, the novel’s closing is ambiguous as it ends with a disfigured Salwa lying on a hospital bed with Jassim by her side, ignorant of the motives of what has happened to his wife. Thus, as Halaby’s narrator rightly points out,

*There’s no “they lived happily ever after”?*  
“Happily ever after” happens only in American fairy tales.  
*Wasn’t this an American fairy tale?*  
It was and it wasn’t. (335)

The novel’s ending reveals the couple’s failure to negotiate the Third Space, and hence to find a place of their own in America. From the beginning, Salwa and Jassim have deliberately chosen to assimilate into upper-middle-class America and adopt its values and its consumerist culture, while rapidly erasing their connections with the Arab homeland. Their early economic success has led to their being completely devoted to the fulfillment of their respective American Dreams, while they have not felt the need

for a negotiated lifestyle combining both Arab and American values. Consequently, they have lived on the margins of the Third Space, which has later precipitated their speedy downfall. The absence of this in-between space has contributed to their fragility and unpreparedness to confront the growing alienation and marginalization they have to endure in the aftermath of September 11, provoking in this way, not only their displacement, but also the collapse of their dreams and their life in America.

## **CONCLUSION**



## CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have studied the heterogeneous nature of the Arab American experience in the United States of America through the selection of four novels by the contemporary writers Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby. I have focused on these novelists' de-construction of the essentialized frameworks of their community's subjectivity and the negotiation of an Arab American Third Space within the context of multiethnic America. I have reached the conclusion that the complexity in the themes and concerns addressed by this literature reveals its maturation as a crucial medium for Arab Americans' creative self-representation in their pursuit of consolidating their sense of belonging to the American community while at the same time emphasizing their links with their Arab heritage. In their attempts to challenge generalized and limited portrayals, which often remain unchecked and unquestioned, contemporary Arab American writers are also aware of the necessity not to go too far the other way, and to balance self-criticism with criticism of these stereotypes. The five chapters included in this dissertation portray the articulation of these ideas through the selected novels by Abu-Jaber and Halaby.

The first chapter provides a historical and literary framework for the whole dissertation, through which I have tried to trace the development of the Arab American literary tradition in relation to the history of Arab presence in the United States for more than a century. In my analysis of the different phases of this literature, it has become clear to me that the writing of each period reflects the history of the community and the individual circumstances of its members, and their efforts to give shape to a communal body which will also be part of the American community. The early immigrants' struggle to achieve white racial status at the beginning of the twentieth century, after

their economic success and their consequent adoption of American values, explains the obsession of early writers to prove themselves worthy in the American context. The second generation of Arab American writers grew up in a highly assimilated community with greatly diminished awareness of their Arab background, which tended to be absent in their work published in the sixties. With the arrival of new politicized immigrants with strong national links to their countries of origin, together with the events taking place in the Middle East, especially the 1967 Arab Israeli war, the Americanized generations started to acquire a renewed Arab ethnic consciousness. While this period witnessed the appearance of an Arab American poetic production, waving between the ethnic discourse and other interests, it paved the way for the coming of age of this literary tradition, starting from the last decade of the twentieth century. Engaged with ethnicity and the racialization of the Arab American experience, contemporary writers are acutely aware of the vulnerability of their community in an age characterized by a strong anti-Arab bias in the United States, especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks. This new generation of Arab American writers has been publishing a growing literary production, including fiction, memoirs, poetry and non-fiction, trying to highlight the diversity, complexity, and also richness of the Arab American experience. Acknowledging their Arab ethnic background, they try to consolidate their tradition within the broad spectrum of multicultural America.

The second chapter is a theoretical framework which offers a definition of Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, through which the scholar challenges ethnocentric notions of selfhood and identity. He argues that the hybrid position destabilizes any stable binary opposition or category because it constitutes a place where categories are crossed, and where a space between defined subject positions is created. For this reason, he deconstructs the pre-given conception of identity both at individual and collective



levels, suggesting that it must rather be enunciated. The Third Space, therefore, provides hybrid individuals with the possibility to create a space where they can maintain a process of translation and negotiation of their difference. I have tried to demonstrate that contemporary Arab American literature articulates Bhabha's concept of the Third Space through the presentation of the works of Lawrence Joseph, Suheir Hammad, Randa Jarrar and Rabih Alameddine. Their focus on ethnicity mirrors the proclamation of hybridity as the essence of an Arab American identity, being an exclusive component of the mosaic of ethnic America. Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby share these same perceptions that are clearly transmitted through the novels that I have selected, which reveal how these writers straddle both sides of the hyphen through the validation of both their American identity and their Arab origin.

In the third chapter, my analysis of the construction of female Arab American identities concludes with the idea of the multilayered subjectivity and the heterogeneity of Arab American women. In *Arabian Jazz* (1993) by Diana Abu-Jaber, the two Jordanian American sisters Jemurah and Melvina face the task of negotiating the multiple sets of duality they find themselves in: two cultures, two families, two countries, two identities, and two languages. Their performance as young Arab American women in the United States is shaped and re-shaped by these elements on a daily basis. To start with, the American environment of a small poor white neighborhood where they have grown up is a profoundly alienating frame which contributes to the displacement of both sisters. Their journey is further problematized by the early death of their American mother, which has led to their being rejected by the American part of the family. Abu-Jaber criticizes American social behavior based on stereotypes and essentializations through her portrayal of attitudes of supremacy among white Americans, not only middle-class but, ironically, lower-class too, who try to

compensate for their inferior economic status by exhibiting racial superiority to “sand niggers,” in this case. However, the jazz band where the girls’ father Matussem plays drums offers him the possibility to overcome some of the racism he is suffering in his work and social entourage, and to open up lines of communication to working-class Anglo-Americans. Jazz emerges as the major element which compensates Matussem for his feelings of loss and displacement. It also shows Abu-Jaber’s intention to depict the possibility of a common ground between Arab Americans and African Americans.

The trauma of the mother’s death is deeply connected to the girls’ consciousness of themselves, not only as individuals, but as Arab Americans as well, because it has deprived them of a natural doorway into America. Consequently, Matussem’s sister, Fatima, tries to fill this space through her attempts to reproduce the oppressive models of her own gendered memory, translated here into her obsession to marry off her nieces to Arab men, which would guarantee the continuity of the homeland’s reconstructed ways. The novelist uses the aunt’s attempts to intervene in her nieces’ construction of their Arab American female identity in order to criticize the idealization of the homeland’s culture, thus expressing contemporary Arab American literature’s transcendence of the nostalgic phase and its engagement with self-critique of its own community. Unlike his sister, Matussem is portrayed as a free-spirited and understanding father who challenges the old ways and imposes no gender restrictions on his daughters.

The mixed messages received by the sisters situate them in a cultural borderland. While Melvina is aware of her dual sense of belonging and of the in-between space where she is placed, Jemorah has been hesitating between which of those two territories to jump into. Identifying herself with her profession as a nurse, Melvina stands at the same distance from her Arab and American parts, as she is the one who decides what to

praise and what to criticize, what to take and what to reject. She seems very American as she emerges as an independent woman who is extremely dedicated to her job, and who dreams of owning her own Harley motorcycle one day. She also appreciates many elements of her Arab heritage, such as Arabic that she perceives as “the purest state of emotional energy” (Abu-Jaber 1993: 304). In this way, she has found her own pattern of identity negotiation allowing her to enjoy both sides of the hyphen. Jemorah, however, has undergone a more complex process of self-identification due to her suspension between both sides of the hyphen. Traumatized by her mother’s death, she is unable to overcome the feelings of loss and displacement, and to get on with her life. She is haunted by her failure to find a home in America without her mother’s presence. She is also portrayed as a passive individual who depends on others to define who she is. While she is Arab because her family defines her as such, she complains that her mother’s premature death has prevented her from having access to her American half. She moves from one extreme decision to another when she accepts Aunt Fatima’s offer to marry her cousin and go back to Jordan, only to suddenly change her mind and decide to stay in America and go back to university. This unexpected shift reveals that she has not really resolved her ambivalence, but has decided to give America another opportunity to be the stage for her identity negotiation in order to free herself of her sense of alienation and find a space of her own where she can enjoy her hyphenated identity.

In my study of *West of the Jordan* (2003) by Laila Halaby, I have tried to describe and illustrate the writer’s intention to challenge the widespread homogeneous depiction of Arab women in mainstream American consciousness through the portrayal of four cousins whose lives oscillate between America and Palestine. Mawal is the only cousin who remains in her Palestinian village of Nawara, which makes her represent the

voice of the ones left behind. She is portrayed as the keeper of the memory of Palestine through her embroidery and also her stories. Her character allows Halaby to celebrate Palestinian traditions through her focus on the embroidery of traditional costumes, which constitute an expression of Palestinian national identity. She is also a reference for all her stories about the people of Nawara, whether living in the homeland or elsewhere, mainly the women, which reveals the network of solidarity that has been created around the embroidery rituals.

Soraya is portrayed as a rebel. Living in Los Angeles from an early age, she defies her parents' homeland rules when she is out of her family's reach and behaves like her fellow American teens. The restrictions imposed by her family force her to lead a double life where she is a sexy and exotic young lady who enjoys her sexual freedom. She uses her body to challenge not only her family and community, but also all the moral values she is told to follow. She repeatedly claims the hybrid construction of her subjectivity, describing herself as a "new breed," and an "in between." At the same time, she expresses her disenchantment with her frustrated attempts to belong to America because she is aware that mainstream perception of her community prevents her from being fully accepted in this country. Her unwillingness to perform the traditional Palestinian woman's role incites her to find her own negotiated in-between space where she can live out her difference and celebrate the new breed status she claims for herself.

Khadija is the American-born cousin who is also struggling to negotiate a complicated second generation Arab American experience. Insisting on her Americanness, she does not accept her hyphenated identity because she refuses to cultivate bonds with Palestine, which is the homeland she only learns about through her family's memories. However, unlike Soraya, she does not rebel against the conservative

upbringing she has received, which makes her realize that she is different from her American friends. Khadija's complicated relationship with her alcoholic and abusive father makes her journey towards self-identification more difficult. However, the day she calls the police seeking protection from her father's violence marks a turning point in the girl's attitude because it signifies the end of her passiveness, and the beginning of an attitude of independence as she tries to find solutions for her dysfunctional family. This experience may offer her the opportunity to sort out the components of her complex subjectivity in order to come to terms with her hyphenated identity.

Hala is the cousin who metaphorically performs the role of a bridge between the Middle East and America because she has succeeded in developing a double sense of belonging to both cultures. Her short stay in Jordan after three years in the United States marks her reconciliation with her past and origins. She has the opportunity to rediscover her country's ancient history and civilization, as well as Arab family values, which leads her to open her eyes to the possibility of negotiating both worlds she belongs to. The blending of these two spaces is symbolized by the traditional Palestinian *roza* (embroidered dress) and the gold charm of Palestine she wears the day she returns to America. She realizes the necessity of finding a balance between her Arab roots and her American present, and thus the fundamental role of the memories of the homeland. Now she is willing to put into practice the negotiation of her hybridity in her American context without forgetting anything she has left behind in Jordan as well as Palestine. These four cousins therefore give voice to thousands of young women with a Palestinian background to tell their unheard stories. The novel challenges mainstream homogenous depiction of Arab and Arab American women, and offers instead a glimpse of the multiplicity of their experience.

The fourth chapter deals with the creative strategies used by Diana Abu-Jaber in *Crescent* (2003) to resist essentialist misrepresentations of Arabs in America. In her deconstruction of these stereotypes which conceal the complexity and diversity of her community, she presents images and depictions of the Middle East that the average American is not used to. Her portrayal of Iraq as the cradle of civilization, with a special focus on its contribution to the world heritage, is interesting as it is so different from the image of this country often transmitted by news channels. The Arab male characters depicted include students, academics, university teachers and poets, among others. For instance, the Iraqi exile Hanif is presented as a charismatic intellectual and scholar, as well as an attractive and admirable lover. In this way, the novelist provides a humanized image of Iraqi and Arab people in general. Moreover, her focus on the cultural field is highly significant because we find references to Arab literature, history and music throughout the novel, showing her commitment to dealing with the issue of the image of Arabs in America.

In my analysis of the in-between spaces provided by the novel, I have drawn attention to the fact that the Arab restaurant plays a fundamental role because, in addition to being a re-creation of home for the Arab characters, it offers a space for constant border crossings and cultural negotiations. It brings together people from different ethnic and cultural origins to share the food cooked by the Iraqi American chef Sirine. Most importantly, Abu-Jaber focuses on finding a common ground with Latino communities in particular, through the two Latino workers in the restaurant. Here, she portrays the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups, highlighting the variety of individual as well as communal experiences, which are part of the ethnic components of American society. One of the significant examples of blending flavors and cultures is the Arab Thanksgiving organized by the chef, whose hybrid menu includes mainly

Middle Eastern but also American and Latino dishes. The omnipresence of food in this novel and the merging of different culinary aromas illustrate the negotiation processes undergone by ethnic groups in America, fusing the traditions of the homelands with the newly acquired customs of the host country. To conclude, *Crescent* (2003) is a hybrid novel, which merges the Middle Eastern oral tradition of storytelling with the form of the Western novel in order to emphasize hybridity as its central discourse. The novel itself is a Third Space where ethnic border crossings provide a site where traditions and identities are being negotiated in order to create new hybrid traditions and identities, shaping, in this way, the cultural landscape of America today.

In the last chapter of this dissertation, dedicated to the study of *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) by Laila Halaby, I have examined the experience of a Jordanian American couple in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States and the collapse of their American dream. I have concluded that Salwa and Jassim's journey reflects their failure to negotiate the Third Space and to carve a place of their own in America. They have both voluntarily taken part in an Americanization process seducing them away from their cultural and religious roots, and thoroughly immersing them in the consumerist comfort of America's capitalist ideals. Their professional success and wealth makes them believe that accumulating luxuries symbolizes their adherence to the American upper-middle-class, and thus puts an official seal on their belonging to the American community. However, September 11 becomes a turning point in their lives because of their fragility and unpreparedness to face the growing marginalization and alienation imposed on them. In an atmosphere of suffocating patriotism, added to an accelerated racialization and profiling of Arab and Muslim Americans, Salwa and Jassim also become increasingly estranged from one another, which places their marriage and their very presence in America on shaky

ground. They have willingly lived on the margins of the Third Space because their devotion to the fulfillment of their respective American dreams has concealed their need for a negotiated lifestyle merging their Arab background with their American present. Halaby is critical to this kind of false belonging to the United States, in which the couple abandon the homeland's values in return for a consumer citizenship based on the promise of wealth and prosperity. Despite their efforts to fit in, this national crisis instigates their exclusion. Suffocated by the "war on terror" atmosphere, Salwa becomes involved in an affair with an American co-worker, and ends up badly beaten and disfigured by him. Because of his ethnic and religious origin, Jassim, the accomplished hydrologist, becomes a 'high-risk' citizen and loses his job. In different ways, they both represent thousands of people with Arab and Muslim backgrounds whose own place in American society is called into question after September 11. Thus, the novel portrays the aftermath of these attacks from an Arab American perspective, which reflects the writer's engagement with the destabilization of the mainstream anti-Arab discourse.

I intend to continue my research into this field of the Arab American literary tradition because I believe there is a need to fill the critical gap that exists in this area. I am particularly interested in the works of some Lebanese American writers who depict the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990), such as Rabih Alameddine and Patricia Sarrafian Ward. In addition, I would like to explore the North African presence in the United States through the works of Moroccan American novelist Laila Lalami, whose novel *The Moor's Account* (2014) has been highly acclaimed. I also aim to move south, as it were, in order to study the history of Arab immigration in Latin America, and at the same time, examine the literary production of some writers of Arab descent, such as the Colombian writer Luis Fayad. My long-term goal would be to embark on a detailed comparative study of the Arab presence in the United States and Latin America.



**SUMMARY IN SPANISH**  
**[RESUMEN EN ESPAÑOL]**



## **RESUMEN**

### **NEGOTIATING THE THIRD SPACE IN THE ARAB AMERICAN FICTION OF DIANA ABU-JABER AND LAILA HALABY**

#### **LA NEGOCIACIÓN DEL TERCER ESPACIO EN LAS NOVELAS ÁRABES NORTEAMERICANAS DE DIANA ABU-JABER Y LAILA HALABY**

La presente tesis doctoral estudia la heterogeneidad de la experiencia árabe norteamericana en Estados Unidos, a través de una selección de cuatro novelas de las escritoras contemporáneas Diana Abu-Jaber y Laila Halaby. Asimismo, se analiza el discurso literario de estas dos autoras, se deconstruyen los aspectos esencialistas de la subjetividad referentes a su comunidad y se estudia la negociación de un Tercer Espacio árabe norteamericano en el contexto de la realidad multiétnica en Estados Unidos. La complejidad de los temas y las preocupaciones que muestran estas novelas revelan la madurez de esta tradición literaria, siendo esta literatura un medio crucial para la autorepresentación creativa de los norteamericanos de origen árabe quienes buscan consolidar su pertenencia a la comunidad norteamericana y, al mismo tiempo, poner de manifiesto sus vínculos con su herencia árabe. En sus intentos de desafiar las imágenes arquetípicas y limitadas, que a menudo permanecen incuestionables y no verificadas, estas escritoras son conscientes de la necesidad de encontrar un equilibrio entre la autocrítica y los estereotipos falsos sobre su comunidad. Los cinco capítulos de esta tesis doctoral analizan e ilustran estas ideas en las novelas seleccionadas de Diana Abu-Jaber y Laila Halaby.

En el Capítulo 1, “The Arab American Experience in the United States of America” [“La experiencia árabe norteamericana en Estados Unidos”], se estudia la tradición literaria árabe norteamericana desde principios del siglo XX hasta hoy en día. Es un marco histórico y literario en el cual se analizan las diferentes fases históricas de

la presencia árabe en Estados Unidos y la producción literaria de cada época. El desarrollo de esta literatura refleja la historia árabe norteamericana y las diferentes circunstancias que empujaron a los escritores de esta comunidad a crear nuevos espacios para hacer llegar sus voces. Este recorrido se inicia con los primeros inmigrantes árabes que comenzaron a llegar desde la Gran Siria a las costas americanas a finales del siglo XIX. En este periodo se analiza la historia de los vendedores ambulantes árabes que lograron establecer sus propios negocios y terminaron siendo asimilados a la clase media de la sociedad norteamericana, adaptándose a sus normas, mientras que, al mismo tiempo, luchaban por su condición racial como blancos. En este periodo aparecieron los escritores emigrados que escribían tanto en árabe como en inglés y los que pertenecían principalmente al movimiento literario Al Mahjar, como es el caso de Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), Ameen Rihani (1876-1931), y Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988) que fundaron la Liga Literaria de Nueva York en 1920. Herederos de dos tradiciones culturales y literarias, pretendían desempeñar el papel de intermediarios culturales en su intento de no solo crear puntos de encuentro filosóficos entre Oriente y Occidente, sino de fusionarlos.

La segunda generación de escritores árabes norteamericanos creció en una época de gran asimilación cultural como consecuencia de la falta de comunicación con la madre patria y de las políticas de los Estados Unidos que limitaron la inmigración hasta 1965. Por consiguiente, los hijos de la primera generación de inmigrantes sirios no hablaban árabe y tenían un conocimiento limitado de la herencia cultural de sus antepasados. Las obras de escritores como Vance Bourjaily (1922-2010) y William Blatty (1928- ) encarnan la culminación del proceso de asimilación puesto que muestran una gran ambivalencia hacia su etnicidad y mantienen una gran distancia con respeto a su identidad árabe.

La segunda y tercera olas de inmigración árabe a Estados Unidos se iniciaron en 1967 y se han prolongado hasta la actualidad. El cambio más llamativo de estos movimientos migratorios fue la llegada de un gran número de profesionales muy preparados y universitarios de diferentes partes del mundo árabe. La presencia de estos nuevos inmigrantes politizados y con fuertes vínculos nacionales, además de los hechos ocurridos en Oriente Medio, especialmente la guerra árabe-israelí de 1967, marcaron el surgimiento de una conciencia étnica árabe entre las generaciones americanizadas. Su decepción por el apoyo oficial de Estados Unidos a Israel y la creciente hostilidad antiárabe en los medios de comunicación americanos provocaron que los miembros de esta comunidad empezaran a identificarse como árabes. En este periodo floreció una considerable producción literaria más bien orientada hacia la poesía en la que se abordaban temas étnicos entre otros.

La tercera fase de la tradición literaria árabe norteamericana estuvo marcada por un cambio significativo hacia la escritura en prosa, acompañada por un compromiso con la etnicidad y la racialización de la experiencia árabe en Estados Unidos. Los escritores contemporáneos son conscientes de la vulnerabilidad de su comunidad en una era caracterizada por los prejuicios antiárabes en Estados Unidos, especialmente después de los ataques terroristas del 11 de septiembre. Esta nueva generación de escritores árabes norteamericanos ha publicado una producción literaria significativa que aborda la diversidad, la complejidad y también la riqueza de la experiencia árabe norteamericana. Hay que señalar que estos escritores reconocen sus orígenes árabes y consolidan su tradición dentro del amplio espectro multicultural de Estados Unidos.

El Capítulo 2, “Theorizing Contemporary Arab American Literature” [“La teorización de la literatura árabe norteamericana contemporánea”], plantea el marco teórico de esta tesis, en el cual se define el concepto del Tercer Espacio de Homi

Bhabha para luego redefinirlo según el discurso árabe norteamericano. El crítico parte de la idea de que la hibridación es una experiencia mixta que provoca la no pertenencia de los individuos a ninguna posición unificada o estable y, como consecuencia, su subjetividad es múltiple e inestable. Con este constructo teórico, Bhabha desafía las nociones etnocéntricas de la identidad. Del mismo modo, el crítico de origen hindú indica que la identidad, ya sea individual o colectiva, no está predefinida porque tiene que ser enunciada. Por tanto, el Tercer Espacio ofrece a los individuos híbridos un espacio donde pueden mantener un proceso de traducción y negociación de sus diferencias.

La segunda sección de este capítulo intenta demostrar que la literatura árabe norteamericana contemporánea articula este mismo concepto a través algunas de las obras de Lawrence Joseph, Suheir Hammad, Randa Jarrar y Rabih Alameddine. La perspectiva sobre el discurso étnico que presentan estos escritores refleja la proclamación de la hibridación como un atributo de la identidad árabe norteamericana, siendo éste un aspecto diferencial del llamado mosaico étnico de los Estados Unidos. Las escritoras Diana Abu-Jaber y Laila Halaby comparten esta visión a través de su discurso literario que plantea la compleja negociación de un espacio intermedio que hace posible la convivencia entre los orígenes culturales árabes y la necesaria adaptación a la sociedad y cultura norteamericanas.

El Capítulo 3, “The Construction of Female Arab American Identities and the Narratives of Displacement in *Arabian Jazz* by Diana Abu-Jaber and *West of the Jordan* by Laila Halaby”, [“La construcción de las identidades femeninas árabes norteamericanas y las narrativas de desplazamiento en *Arabian Jazz* de Diana Abu-Jaber y *West of the Jordan* de Laila Halaby”], propone el análisis de la multiplicidad y la heterogeneidad de la identidad femenina norteamericana de origen árabe. Este

capítulo se inicia con el estudio de *Arabian Jazz* (1993) de Diana Abu-Jaber en el que se examina el recorrido de Jemorah y Melvina, dos hermanas de origen jordano, en la negociación de las dualidades a las que se enfrentan: dos idiomas, dos familias, dos países y dos identidades. Hay que señalar que su desarrollo como jóvenes mujeres árabes y norteamericanas en Estados Unidos se está formando y reformulando en su diario devenir. El hecho de crecer en un barrio con una mayoría blanca pobre y la prematura muerte de la madre americana contribuyen al desplazamiento de las hermanas. Asimismo, se analiza el papel de la parte jordana de la familia por medio de lo que considero el intento de la escritora de desmitificar la madre patria a través del personaje de la tía en su esfuerzo de reproducir en sus sobrinas los modelos represivos de su pasado étnico idealizado. Además, se estudia una versión híbrida de la masculinidad árabe norteamericana por medio del personaje de Matussem cuyo interés en la música de jazz afecta a su proceso de negociación como hombre y también como padre. En este contexto, Melvina, la enfermera a tiempo completo, y Jemorah la soñadora deben llevar a cabo la compleja negociación de su identidad.

La segunda sección de este capítulo examina la novela *West of the Jordan* (2003) de Laila Halaby y la presentación de las narraciones de desplazamiento de cuatro primas de origen palestino. Cada capítulo que narran es el lugar donde exponen sus identidades en proceso de negociación como mujeres árabes y / o americanas, teniendo en cuenta las diferencias personales, culturales y económicas de cada una de ellas. Mawal es la única prima que vive en Palestina, lo que la convierte en la voz de los que se han quedado atrás y la que mantiene la memoria de Palestina. Las demás jóvenes, Soraya, Khadija y Hala tienen que negociar su espacio intermedio en su contexto norteamericano. En este sentido, las cuatro primas dan voz a miles de mujeres de origen Palestino para contar sus historias inéditas. Por consiguiente, la novela desafía la

representación homogénea de las mujeres árabes y las árabes norteamericanas en los medios de comunicación en Estados Unidos y revela la multiplicidad de sus experiencias.

El Capítulo 4, “*Crescent and the Creative Strategies of Resistance*” [“*Crescent* y la estrategias creativas de resistencia”], analiza las nuevas estrategias de representación sugeridas por Diana Abu-Jaber en *Crescent* (2003) como medio para resistir las representaciones falsas y esencialistas de los árabes en Estados Unidos. La escritora deconstruye el estereotipo del terrorista asociado con las personas de origen árabe a través de la presentación de intelectuales urbanos, académicos, poetas y universitarios que no están presentes en el imaginario norteamericano. De igual modo, la novela presenta una imagen humanizada de Iraq, al reflexionar sobre su patrimonio histórico y cultural. Además, se pueden encontrar numerosas referencias a la cultura de Oriente Medio, especialmente a la literatura y la música. En este capítulo se estudian también los espacios intermedios donde los personajes híbridos articulan su individualidad y buscan estrategias de negociación. En este sentido, el restaurante árabe no sólo funciona como un espacio donde recrear la tierra natal en la frontera étnica sino también como un territorio para otras negociaciones culturales. En esta misma línea, la comida se representa como un vínculo humano que construye puentes con las diferentes comunidades étnicas. Así pues, la novela misma es un tercer espacio donde las tradiciones y las identidades se negocian para crear nuevas tradiciones e identidades híbridas, y dar forma de esta manera, al paisaje cultural actual de Estados Unidos.

Finalmente, el último capítulo de esta tesis “*Once in a Promised Land: The Collapse of the American Dream*”, [“*Once in a Promised Land: el colapso del sueño americano*”], está dedicado al estudio de la novela *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) de Laila Halaby, ya que es una de las primeras obras literarias árabes norteamericanas en



abordar las consecuencias directas de los ataques terroristas del 11 de septiembre de 2001 en las vidas de muchos individuos de origen árabe o musulmán en Estados Unidos. Esta novela explora la noción del sueño americano desde una perspectiva árabe norteamericana en una época caracterizada por la racialización acelerada y la discriminación de los ciudadanos originarios de Oriente Medio. Este capítulo analiza la búsqueda de este sueño a través de la experiencia de una pareja de origen jordano que ha optado por asumir la cultura consumista de Estados Unidos como estilo de vida y disfrutar de sus perspectivas aparentemente brillantes en la tierra prometida norteamericana, a costa de negar sus tradiciones árabes. Halaby retrata el desplazamiento sufrido por la pareja después de los ataques terroristas, en un país en el que comienzan a cuestionar su propio sentido de pertenencia a la comunidad americana, lo que lleva al fracaso de su matrimonio, y a convertir su sueño americano en una pesadilla. En este sentido, la novela proyecta la crisis de la pareja en su negociación del Tercer Espacio y en la búsqueda de un espacio propio en Estados Unidos.

Las futuras líneas de investigación que se abren a partir de esta tesis doctoral son, por un lado, seguir con el estudio de la tradición literaria árabe norteamericana porque considero que es necesario contribuir a un corpus crítico en este campo de estudio. Por otro lado, estoy muy interesada en abordar las obras de escritores norteamericanos de origen libanés que indagan la problemática de la guerra civil en el Líbano (1975-1990), como es el caso de Rabih Alameddine y Patricia Sarrafian Ward. Asimismo, quisiera investigar la presencia norteafricana en Estados Unidos a partir de las obras de la escritora de origen marroquí Laila Lalami cuya novela *The Moor's Account* (2014) ha sido muy aclamada por la crítica. Por último, me propongo también dirigirme hacia el sur y estudiar la historia de la inmigración árabe en Latinoamérica, y al mismo tiempo, examinar la producción literaria de algunos escritores de origen árabe

como el escritor colombiano Luis Fayad. En resumen, tengo la intención de iniciar un estudio comparativo de la presencia árabe en Estados Unidos y Latinoamérica.

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